

JUVENILE



DELINQUENT

THE NOVEL BY
BUFFALO BANGKOK



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I tried to claw out of my mother's pussy sideways.

It would be my first failure in life. The first of many stubborn attempts.

This novel is nothing but a diatribe. A meandering account of mental illness, affluenza, drug use, depravity, chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE), and psychosis. It will focus mostly on demons, despair, although it will contain moments of levity and optimism. It will contain triumph.

This is not literature in its pure form.

This book was inspired by Henry Miller's "Tropic of Cancer," and is dedicated to him. It is also dedicated to bad writers, failed musicians, Dada artists, broken actors, and comedians who enjoy being booed...

This book is in praise of hair metal and gangsta rap.

This book is for CTE survivors and strivers, and people in prisons, both physical and mental, and for those on the outside. The weirdos, demimondes, the outcasts. Those unable and unwilling to conform to consumerist society, groupthink, and traditionalist ideals.

This book will not conform to "TL;DR" culture.

And it will not conform to Cancel Culture, a pandemic in which creators are terrified to express themselves, share their imaginations, deepest thoughts... There will be no self-censoring, no fear of the bloodthirsty vampires of political correctness.

I am not afraid of the vampires and their Stalinism. Twitter Mobs are welcome...

This book is the exorcism of demons, and its stories are written like impressionist paintings. Make of them what you will.

This book, really, is a time capsule. A collection of memories. An account of a journey. Much of it was written during the time of CORVID, in which there was ample time for self-reflection...

This book is not a book. It is a spit in the face, a kiss, and a love letter to letters. It is a stubborn attempt, coming out sideways.

This book is ugly. It is deliberately imperfect, much like life itself.

1

The canvass: A hospital in Miami Beach. My mother in stirrups. My mother, a decent, learned lady, was wailing in anguish. Her svelte frame contorting. Her curly, short brown hair sweaty and matted to her scalp. Her almond eyes flashing fire red.

Me: Like Rosemary's Baby. I'm unnatural. I should never have existed. I'm a demon. Injected like a heroin needle.

You may balk at this, but there was an unholy conception. A train of ghosts and pool of blood.

I emerged from my mother's pussy, on an unseasonably cold December Miami Beach morning. Labor went through the night where a light dusting of snow caked the swaying palm trees. The blast of polar air trumpeting my arrival.

I was born into a puddle of shit, diarrhea, and bloody mucosa and placenta as my poor mother screamed, and the nurses performed reconnaissance.

A luscious Latina, of Cuban or Colombian eugenics, her voice full of diphthongs, passed forceps to the Jewish doctor, son of a holocaust survivor, and he poked and prodded in between my mother's legs, into her vaginal lacuna, and with skill, unearthed me, pulled me, slimy, bloody and shit-stained into a slimy, bloody and shit-stained planet Earth.

My father, the bearded man, was berserk, snapping photos. A biologist, a U of Miami professor, he documented every moment of the birth, scientifically, pictorially, hoping to commemorate and eliminate any degree of evanescence.

Of course, nowadays this might be documented on social media, posted about, heralded to the world, accumulating tons of endorphin inducing “likes.”

But this was 1977.

The event was on film and glued into a photo album. A laminated, plastic one!

Those photo albums, now, seem like tubers growing on a potato...

I was a fat and healthy baby. Placed into a maternity ward, farm of babies, screaming, crying, in rows, in the tabernacle, not knowing what Earth had in store for us. Not knowing why we'd been expelled from the warmth of the womb. Not knowing if we'd grow to be millionaires, rapists, teachers, mass murderers, engineers, actors, accountants, lawyers, football players, homeless, veterans, drug dealers, Presidents of the USA, or janitors.

All our various fates. Our alleles. The rows of cherubs, cute as koalas. Us, on the barrier island of Miami Beach, Collins Avenue.

Us, innumerable souls, meticulously placed in oblong boxes, our first box of life, well, second after the one we'd emerged from, and we were given ducal care.

The nurse who'd feed me, a wraith, her olfactory senses, being around all those babies, daily, had to be finely tuned or non-existent.

I imagine her loving care. Her touching us with tenderness. Immutable, as our mothers recovered, got their vaginas stitched up, slept off the pain, trauma and excitement, joy of childbirth.

2

My father was a pharaoh. In a past life. My first memory is a foggy recollection of him taking me to a baseball game. Orioles versus Yankees, spring training, somewhere in Florida.

When I was a fetus, I moved with my parents, from NYC to Miami Beach, where I grew up, because my Pops had gotten a research position, professorship at the University of Miami.

My father, the progenitor, the bearded man, was tall and strong, walked in long strides. He was a kind but stern man, of Russian descent. He'd been a hippy in the 1960s, but by the early 1980s, he was a hard-working man, consumed with math and science. Consumed with work. Work. Work.

Every day. He'd rise early, leave for work, spend the whole day there, return by evening with a look of both exasperation and elation.

Often, he'd bring me a present. A toy, a snack or something. And I'd await him with bated breath, running downstairs to hug him, welcome him home.

But he had a dark side to him. His temper. He'd flip on a dime, go from happy to angry. Anytime I'd do something wrong, he'd go ballistic. Yelling, cursing, throwing chairs. He'd slap, spank me.

He was also a maniac driver. Far beyond what was considered normal hostile NYC driving.

He'd drive at frenetic speeds, cut people off, give the finger, poke his head out of the window and curse at people in his sharp, nasal, honking Bronx accent.

One of my first memories was him cutting off this car full of Latin people, I think in Miami, and my father screaming out the window at them and them cursing back at us in Spanish.

It's fortuitous that none of those he accosted were armed and that he never had a gun, or else my trajectory in life would have been far different.

However, his driving did in fact change the trajectory of my life.

One dark night, when I was around age 5, as we returned from, something, I don't know, my father was driving at his usual frantic pace when he nearly plowed into another car. He slammed the brakes, and me, in the front seat, in a loose-fitting seat belt, slammed and banged my skull, around the crest of my forehead, on the windshield, hitting it so hard that it cracked the windshield, though I didn't bloody my head.

On the top of my head, I've got a small dent from the incident, visible only if examining it closely.

I'm sure that this incident left me concussed. With all that has come out about CTE, brain damage in football players, athletes, I wonder if this incident changed me, affected my development.

Before the accident, I'd never been in trouble, was a smart, normal child. But after, I suffered from mood swings, depression, memory issues, and I got in fights, verbal and physical and have had various mental issues plaguing me to this day.

Listening to Rosanne Barr's story of being in a car accident as a kid and how it affected her, changed her, and hearing of Aaron Hernandez, other football players' stories, I wondered and still do, if this accident had a similar bearing on me.

Back to the incident itself, I remember after my head smacked the windshield, I saw what was either floaters or stars, and my father, upon witnessing the cracked windshield, told me I was going to the hospital, but I retorted that I was fine. There was no blood. But it sure hurt. I can't remember much else of that night. And I don't remember if we went to the hospital or not.

3

Shortly after the car accident, I'd gotten into karate, inspired by the movie "The Karate Kid."

I loved kicking and punching people. I'd look forward to karate like it was Christmas and would practice my moves, my kicking and punching every day. Air kicks, air punches, punching invisible men in my bedroom. It was all I wanted to do, punch and kick!

I remember an older boy in my karate class. Named Michael.

He'd always wear Adidas everything and was tall, dark and handsome. A Black Panamanian.

I'm not sure why, probably to toughen me up, but our sensei would pit us against each other in sparring.

Michael would kick my ass, literally, every time. No matter what I did, he'd always win, beating on me, kicking me, his body too large, his strength too much.

But I had heart. I'd keep coming, take his shots and not back down until sensei pulled us apart.

The upside of taking Michael's beatings was that it did toughen me up. When I'd go to school, and any kid my own age, size would start to bully me or tease me, I'd handle him quickly, aggressively, making many a snot-nosed brat run to the teachers crying.

I'd fight fair, but I admit that there were times I'd fight unfair as well. Such as the time I'd sucker-punched a kid named Atari in the hallway.

I'm not sure why I did it. He was one of those people I didn't like but couldn't tell you exactly why. Maybe it was how he looked, talked, dressed or smelled. Whatever it was, he'd been alone in the hallway, bent over, digging into his Transformers backpack, and I silently crept up behind him, clutched my hands together, raised them high in the air like I was holding an ax and then I chopped down, violently, cracking the poor bastard on the spine. I still remember him screaming "ah, man!" and me darting off, turning a corner and hauling ass down a stairwell...

There was another kid about my age, an annoying little blabbermouth shit who lived around the corner. I don't recall his name, but I remember him being a total bitch, a whiner, and an annoyance. I remember he'd said or done something that angered me, and I remember having a girl, Alice, talk him out of his house. As he stepped into the street, I jumped up from behind a car and crept up behind him, locked him in a full-nelson and flung him around, like a ragdoll.

I can still hear him crying, whimpering as I throttled his weak writhing body and pressed the back of his neck with my interlaced hands and then threw his bitch ass to the ground, where he rolled around the asphalt, wailing like a wounded animal.

His parents called mine, threatening to call the police if I touched him again.

My parents decided it was karate's fault. They considered karate a vitiation, that it was corrupting me, making me violent, and they withdrew me from karate, prohibited me from partaking in any martial arts...

During my last days at the dojo, the sensei let us watch the film “Dawn of the Dead.”

I had nightmares for months after that, thinking zombies would eat me, hallucinating that zombies were everywhere. I’d pull the covers over my head at night and pray to God the zombies wouldn’t eat me.

My fear of the zombies made me even angrier that I’d been taken out of karate because I figured that if I knew how to fight, maybe I could beat the zombies away before they ate me.

To this day, I wish my parents hadn’t withdrawn me from karate.

I believe, more so now than ever, especially with how fat and weak so many of today’s children are, how undisciplined and listless they are, that martial arts are highly beneficial for kids, teaches them discipline. In fact, after I left karate, I got in even more fights, and lost more of them, being out of practice, knowing less of how to defend myself.

School bullies are the worst of zombies.

4

It was around this time, growing up, that I found a new obsession besides karate; two, actually. The first was music.

From since I could remember, music had a strong effect on me.

I’d hear my parents playing Rolling Stones records and would sing and dance along, dancing wildly, kicking and strutting, like I was Mick Jagger. And in my mind, I believed I really was.

I loved the Beatles, too, especially their earlier pop stuff, “I Wanna Hold Your Hand,” their first record.

I’d play the vinyl, dance around the room, grab a broomstick and become a Beatle, pretend it was me singing, playing guitar.

(It was around then that my parents took notice of my hot-feet, predilection to spontaneously dance. My mother, once a ballerina, decided to enroll me in ballet

classes, which, for whatever reason, I never took to. I can remember an incredibly vivid dream I had during my ballet days of me cutting off my penis with scissors and then ballet dancing in a unitard afterward. I'm sure Freud would expound eloquently on that one...)

As a little kid I loved my parents' records, The Stones, The Beatles, Elvis, but my favorite artist had to be Michael Jackson. His album "Thriller" remains one of my all-time favorites, to this day, and the feeling is inveterate. Oh, how I'd groove and move to that record, dancing around the house like my feet were on fire!

Now I know, of course, that there was a demon in Michael Jackson. No normal grown man has little boys, not his own children, share his bed.

To me, though, there were two Michaels. The first Michael, the Thriller and pre-Thriller Michael, that was the Michael I loved. The Thriller Michael, the suave, slick dancing, moonwalking and multi-octave singing, "Billy Jean" bad motherfucker Michael.

Everything post-Thriller is a different Michael. Certainly aesthetically. The man was consumed by demons, his fame, his upbringing. Not that it excuses anything, but it simply explains it, I aver. His mental development froze. It's rumored he'd been chemically castrated, which could explain more than his falsetto.

Thriller, pre-Thriller Michael was the greatest pop singer. Ever. Period. And nothing, not even an HBO documentary can change that.

5

I later discovered rap and heavy metal. Both of which are still my favorite musical forms to this day. I had a boombox and a Walkman and somehow came into possession of tapes by LL Cool J, Run DMC, and The Beastie Boys.

I remember our house being burglarized and how upset I was that my boombox and LL Cool J tape "Bigger and Deffer" were stolen. Fortunately, my other tapes were on my person and remained safe.

Heavy metal came into my life slightly later, when I was in a store with my mother and I saw the Ozzy Osbourne cassette tape "Diary of a Madman."

Ozzy, on the tape's cover artwork, looked a lot like the zombies from "Dawn of the Dead," which drew my attention, and I felt like it couldn't be a coincidence. This time it didn't scare me. Maybe because I hadn't been seeing zombies for a little while, at this point, and it made sense that Ozzy was one of them. Maybe the other zombies were trying to lead me to Ozzy, after all...

I asked my mother, pointing at the tape, what it was, what was that thing on the tape's cover, the grotesque creature that fascinated me, the creature that I couldn't distinguish from zombie or man. My mother said it was a man, a terrible man, named Ozzy Osbourne, a terrible man who made loud horrible music.

"Cool!" I thought, smiling at the Ozzy tape like it was my Christmas present.

Immediately I loved Ozzy. To this day, any terrible man making loud horrible music or noise or inflammatory writing, that is what I'm all about. I knew this, even as a child. Ozzy won my approbation instantaneously.

Despite Ozzy being a terrible man who made loud, horrible music, my mother still bought me the tape. Why, I'm not sure. Probably to avoid me making a scene in the store, begging her, in tears, or throwing myself to the floor, writhing and screaming for her to buy me the Ozzy Osbourne tape.

Her aversion, use of cash to avoid a temper tantrum a common tactic of hers to mollify me.

And the threat was worth it. How lucky I am to have been such an annoying little shit and that my mother shelled out that 7 bucks to buy that tape!

That tape was gold. Pure gold! I loved it and still do. From the opening riff of "Over the Mountain," I was floored. Hooked. I'd never heard anything like it. I couldn't believe anything as amazing as Randy Rhoades' guitar playing could even be possible. And the song "Believer," the creepy vibe, Ozzy's sonic voice and Randy Rhoades' virtuoso guitar work, that song, the first time I heard it, had me terrified, thinking the zombies would be back, like it was a siren call to them, and I hid under my bed, worried they'd pour in from the windows and eat me!

The record still is a favorite of mine.

Not long after I got cable, discovered MTV, and I found more heavy metal, “Headbanger’s Ball,” and metal is what has given me countless joy, purpose in life, to this day.

Hard Rock. Metal. Loud aggressive, distorted guitars. Screaming vocals. Pounding drums. Dudes who dressed like women and sang songs about Satan.

There’s something comforting to me about heavy metal. No matter where I am in life, what I’m doing, it’s a music I can always return to. Watching heavy metal videos instills tranquility in me. Takes me back to safe places, happy places that I existed in as a child. The music soothes me. It protects me, even now, from zombies...

Metal is still an obsession of mine, and I went through phases where I’d only listen to hard rock, nothing else. However, as I’ve aged, I’ve become more open-minded about music. Though rap and hard rock remain my favorites, I enjoy listening to pretty much everything.

I have two external hard drives, packed with over 1TB of various tunes, mostly metal, rap, electronic music, and pop. I keep two phones, both packed with songs, and one of my pastimes is listening to and watching music videos, mostly on YouTube these digital days.

And yes, I still occasionally will close the blinds, doors, and if I’m by myself and I get the urge, I will dance, dance alone, when no one else can see my Elaine from “Seinfeld” moves and gyrations.

6

My other obsession I developed at an unusually young age is girls. Females.

I’ve always, since I can recall, been attracted to them.

Their bodies, voices, manners.

Their smells. Clothes. Pretty much everything about them.

The first girls I can remember being involved with were in my earliest days, at around 6, 7 years of age.

One was named Michelle. We were in an after-school program together. She was a year my elder, was a bit taller, with sandy brown hair and immaculate cheekbones, pretty brown eyes. I think she was Italian or Spanish.

We'd sneak off, into the woods, and touch, explore each other's young bodies.

I can't remember if she was the first girl whose vagina I saw. It's possible she was. I remember inspecting it, amazed at the hairless mound, her absence of a penis.

She'd look, feel at my penis the same way, with a look of genuine amazement, curiosity.

We'd kiss as well. But most of our time we spent hugging, sitting together and talking.

I wonder where, who, what she grew to be...

The other girl I first remember was Alice (the girl who'd helped me attack the neighborhood fuck boy).

Alice was a year younger, I think, and had short, curly blond hair and blue eyes, looked sort of like Shirley Temple.

We never did anything sexual, that I remember.

The closest thing to it was when we played "show me yours and I show you mine," compared no-no places. I'd played this with many girls in my school.

Alice also showed me something I'll never forget. Being a young child, I was just learning to use my body, learning how it worked. But I didn't know how the female body worked; namely, I didn't know if girls pissed. They didn't have penises, so how would they? If they did, where did the piss come from? Did it just flow out their holes like turning on a shower? I couldn't wrap my head around it. I knew they had to be doing something because I'd seen girls bathrooms, and I knew there must be things happening inside those bathrooms, or else why even have them?

So I asked Alice about it. I wanted to know the truth. Did girls piss? And if so, how did they do it?

Alice, being quite young and naïve, wasn't able to explain it well in words, but did confirm that girls in fact did piss. And I asked if she'd let me see how it was done. Giggling, possibly from nervousness, she complied.

I snuck into a girls bathroom with her and watched her drop her white panties from underneath her plaid sundress. She hiked up the dress so it was over her waist, exposing her bald pelvic mound.

Then she sat to the toilet, legs spread, and I watched. From the top of her vagina fold a tiny pink worm-like thing extended itself, like a small penis and pissed out a yellow stream of liquid. It was like she had a tiny dick in her vagina! I couldn't believe it! It was almost magical how the little pink worm arose from out of nowhere. It was then I gained a whole new respect and admiration for girls.

Girls, the magical beings!

Girls, the bringers of life! Girls who always make me feel so alive!

Alice herself was magical, lively, lovely, and kind. We'd climb palm trees together, pick and collect coconuts. That was our thing. And there was one sunny afternoon, up in the trees, she said something about us getting married.

But soon enough, her family moved away, to where, I don't know, and I never saw her again.

This was around the time when my father became sick.

7

I remember when it started. My father had been experiencing terrible back pains, complaining of them every day, clutching his back, and often limping around the house. Despite his condition, we'd taken a vacation to the woods, stayed in a house in a forest, in Georgia, in the Blue Ridge Mountains.

Driving up there, we stopped at a restaurant to eat lunch. It was a very waspy place. Sort of like a country club. Everyone there was White, blond, blue eyes.

We were the only Jews.

And I think the waiter knew this. I remember him, a chubby, red haired man, with a Southern drawl, and he dutifully attended to all the other customers, sweet as sugar to them, but he totally ignored us, didn't take our order.

Finally, my father complained to management, and I don't remember if we were served by another waiter or if we left.

Perhaps this was my introduction to antisemitism.

While staying at the vacation house, I watched "The Terminator" on Betamax tape, and after finishing the movie, I went to ask my parents if cyborgs were real and if they might kill us one day. The cyborgs didn't scare me as much as the zombies, but still, there were a formidable, credible threat, to my young mind, and perhaps with AI evolving, they're a realer threat than zombies... Which most of us are these days, on our phones, but I, again, digress...

Worried about cyborgs, I walked down the hallway to my parents' room. When I approached the threshold of my parent's doorway, I caught my parents fooling around in bed, which was the first time I'd seen a grown woman naked.

I stared for a few seconds and ran away, ran for dear life, as if my feet were on fire. I was absolutely horrified by the moans my mother was making. It was far worse than the cyborgs!

I was also terrified that my mother's pussy was hairy, and it struck me how different it looked than Michelle's, Alice's, and the several girls with which I'd played "I'll show you mine..." To this day, I believe that seeing my mother's hairy pussy, hearing her moans traumatized me and caused me to prefer a shaved or neatly trimmed vagina...

My father, while at the vacation house, began experiencing even worse back pains, like nothing he'd had prior.

When we got back home, he scheduled a checkup, and, after a couple further exams, the doctors found a cancerous growth, and that he had pancreatic cancer.

I still remember before the diagnosis, driving to the hospital, learning the words "benign" and "malignant" and him having a procedure to see which type it was.

Afterwards, he told me that there was a 50% chance he'd live and 50% chance he'd die. I'd discovered later that he'd told me this because he couldn't bring himself to tell the truth. The cancer was terminal, and he was given about a year to live.

In the months that followed, his health deteriorated.

He lost weight, became skeletal. His skin became jaundiced. His cheeks were sunken. His once thick wavy black hair wilted like a dead plant and fell out. He'd pass malodorous gas. He'd vomit. I remember us keeping buckets around the house for him to vomit in.

He and my mother would fight, screaming at each other, over what, I didn't know then, but I'd found later that it was her trying to convince him to accept the reality of his situation and that it was impossible for him to come to terms with, like he thought it wasn't really happening. He'd been convinced a quack doctor in New York, who was performing a "radical" cancer treatment, involving injecting alcohol into tumors, that that could cure him.

I remember asking him if he died could he please try to talk to me from Heaven.

He didn't really respond to that.

He wasn't religious, and, a scientist, he was an atheist, so I'm sure that on some level, he must have known the gravity of his situation. And as opposed to a religious person, who might find comfort in thinking there'd be a Heaven he'd see, my father didn't have anything to look forward to. For atheists, death really is death.

Even though he was an atheist, maybe because his father had escaped the USSR, arriving to America by boat at age 13, and his father had been an atheist and done nothing Jewish whatsoever, not even celebrating holidays, my father wanted different for me. He wanted me to have the "Jewish" experience and had sent me to synagogue; we'd go every Saturday.

(Thinking back on it, he'd probably wanted the Jewish experience for himself too, was living it vicariously through me.)

Our rabbi was quite helpful during my father's illness. He spent time with my father, as my father's health worsened. They had long talks about life, science,

the Torah. Despite my father's lack of spirituality, he and the rabbi bonded immensely.

(Strangely enough, the rabbi was a Red Sox fan and my father a Yankees fan. Perhaps death is the only thing powerful enough to unite those factions...)

I don't remember the rabbi speaking with me or my mother, however. I don't even recall what he looked like.

I do remember a couple people from my father's family coming over. One was my aunt, an apple-faced frumpy woman who wore heaps of garish makeup and musky perfumes and had come from England. As well as an uncle, a shaggy-faced hippy coming from California. I remember them staying with my mom, dad, and me at the house, during the ordeal.

My father's family were in dismay, and like him, they couldn't accept what was happening. They were who'd suggested my father to see the quack doctor in NYC who claimed he could cure cancer by injecting alcohol into the tumors.

They, my father's family, and my mother fought a lot, much of it due to them expecting my mother to handle all the housework, cleaning, cooking, while she also worked and was attempting to raise and care for me as well as her dying husband.

The family, particularly my aunt, paid little attention to me or my mother, perhaps due to my mother never ingratiating herself to them, my aunt being very possessive of my father, too, and never bonding with, or even making much of an attempt to get to know my mother.

My aunt, my father's sister, had had her own heartbreak, losing their mother to breast cancer fifteen years prior. My grandmother's death also a slow, brutally painful one, her catatonic on pain pills, withering and waiting for death on their couch, in front of the TV, before finally passing away in a hospice.

Then my aunt's father, my grandfather, died in a car accident, five years afterwards. My grandfather and his new wife, plus two other relatives of mine, driving on a bridge in rural New York state, the driver being my step-grandmother, the lady a very short, very elderly woman, who was barely able to

see over the steering wheel, and the four, in the car, driving off a bridge, the gray Buick plunging into a river.

I don't know if they died on impact. I hope for their sake they went quickly and painlessly. Drowning to me has always been one of the worst ways a person could die. Something about not being able to breathe, the pain, the horror, lungs filling with water. I really do hope that didn't befall them.

(I never met either of those grandparents. Both died before I was born. I'd heard that my grandmother was a lovely, kind and caring woman. Before she went to a party in the Bronx, where she'd meet my grandfather, she kept saying to her sister, "I just hope they like me!" And fortunately, they did like her, as did everyone who knew her...)

((My grandfather wasn't as well-liked. He was a quiet, sullen man, hardened by his upbringing, coming to America, from the USSR, on a boat when he was 13, with only \$15 in his pocket. He didn't speak English. He knew very few people. He'd had it tough, worked in factories, most of his adult life he'd worked in a factory that produced war planes and was, however, delighted that his planes could bomb the Germans and Japanese in World War 2.))

((((My grandfather and father had a strained relationship. My grandfather had come to America with Horatio Alger dreams of finding the roads paved with gold. But, in reality, he found himself slaving away in factories, living in a series of tiny apartments in the Bronx... My grandfather practiced the old, cold Eastern European tough love, never praising my father to his face, but whenever my father wasn't around, my grandfather was bragging to everyone about his boy. Sadly, my father never heard this, and he wanted to; he wanted just once for his father to praise him, show his approval, be kind and loving. After my father left for college, they rarely spoke, and were just beginning to reconcile at the time of my grandfather's tragic and sudden death.)))

Back to my aunt, before my father's illness, she'd lost her pregnancy to miscarriage, and her husband divorced her, leaving her mostly because he wanted kids.

Having just experienced miscarriage and divorce, it was incredibly difficult for my aunt to lose my father, one of her few last remaining close family members.

They'd grown up together in a shoebox apartment in the South Bronx, back when it was a Jewish, Italian, and Irish neighborhood, and she and my father had remained close throughout their winding paths in life.

She'd left America for a job in England many moons ago and stayed there after marrying a local man, adopting a British accent after only a couple months and adapting quickly to the British lifestyle.

(Having later lived abroad, traveled in the UK, I can say from firsthand experience it does become tiring having people mention your accent, daily, asking you where you're from, and you having to tell your emigration story repeatedly. So I believe she may have taken up the accent to blend in, avoid sticking out. Or it might be a subconscious thing... Any "Yank" living in the UK will surely pick up on the British English and slang, the British slang being the world's best, in my opinion, but she's the only American, aside from Madonna, I'd seen take up the British accent, full on, and I've never once seen a Brit in America take up the American accent... I mean, seriously, who would want to give up that slang!)

My aunt would still visit America once a year or my father would travel to England, Europe to see her. Despite their distance in geography, they remained closely emotionally connected.

As I previously stated, my aunt never connected with my mother. And nerves were frayed, with my father dying and the grief to all that that brought. After a heated argument with my mother, my aunt and uncle left our house shortly before my father took a turn for the worse and went into a coma.

Before he went into the coma, my father had come back from the hospital to see me.

He told me we had one day together and asked what I wanted to do.

I didn't know what to do or say. All I knew was that there was this toy I saw my classmates playing with at school and that I wanted it and so we drove around, checked a couple stores, but didn't find it.

Of course, as a grown man, I'd have asked him to sit down, eat and drink with me, tell me as many of his stories and dreams and important lessons as he could. But, sadly, as eight-year-olds, we don't have such foresight.

The day my father died, I was playing kickball with my classmates when my mother arrived to pick me up from school. When I saw her approaching the playground, it was like she was the Grim Reaper; I knew why she was there. Her face looked carved out of stone. I think her emotional reservoir had been drained.

We then drove to the hospital, in silence, and the hospital staff allowed us to see his dead body.

They let me be alone for a time, with him.

I examined his dead body. He lay in a baby blue hospital gown and looked, with his eyes pressed shut, almost like he was sleeping, but it was somehow different. Standing alongside his deathbed, I pulled up the white sheet, peered under it, and saw his catheter.

I let the sheet fall back in place. Then I touched his face, held his jaw, and spoke for him, forced him to tell me he was sorry for dying and that he'd be back later.

Later on, in the following weeks, I'd cry all night, yell and scream for him to come back, to talk to me, but he wouldn't. He was silent. My mother would rush into the room, comfort me, sometimes give me a pill or shot of whisky to put me to sleep.

I also stopped going to synagogue because I was angry at God for letting my father die.

I remember at the funeral, it rained, and I told my mother it was God crying for what he did to my dad.

Many people turned up for his funeral, and I was asked by the rabbi to give a eulogy. I don't remember much of what I said, other than "He was the best dad I ever had."

(I do recall, though, as I was giving the eulogy, seeing what looked like my father's ghost, standing in the back of the synagogue, with a forlorn look on his face, and him turning around, slowly, and walking out the door, perhaps on his way to Heaven, or whatever afterlife exists. Was this his communication with me from beyond the grave? Or PTSD? CTE? I'd like to think it was his spirit, and I hope he heard my eulogy...)

The rabbi must have had quite a bizarre day, with his son being born on the same day, in the same hospital as my father died in... The rabbi and most all of my father's friends, family, who were there at that funeral, at the wake, at our house, following the final services, though, they basically disappeared after his death.

It was like cancer was contagious, and they didn't want to catch it. Many also had young children. I guess they didn't want a similar fate to befall them or their kids.

Many years later a friend of my mother's would tell me, after she'd survived brain cancer, about her friends leaving her, even telling her things about how her cancer battle made them feel, as if a person battling brain cancer should give a damn about how it affected her friends' moods.

The abandonment I felt still burns me to this day.

All those people, that room packed at the funeral, those family members who never visited; the family friends, like Bryce, a Vietnam vet, who walked with a limp from being shot in the leg in the Battle of Hue, who was plagued by night terrors from his time in the war, and who smoked weed with my dad, and would come by the house all the time. He stopped coming by after my dad died. I never saw him after that.

All those people from the funeral, who disappeared from my life, left not only a hole in my development, but left me having a more difficult time bonding with others, afraid on some level, they'd abandon me the way those people did, because of my father's cancer.

It's also made me not want children of my own. Because I don't want to risk dying on them, leaving them.

I've had many people tell me many things about it. One callous psychiatrist insisting "I get over it." Kids at my school, eight-year-olds, who knew about it, taunting me, saying "I'm glad your dad is dead!" to me, and a camp counselor, about twenty-years-old, when I was twelve, also taunting me about it, challenging me to a fistfight.

Situations like my father's certainly do bring out the best and worst in people. The whole spectrum of humanity.

His death left a hole inside me that will never be filled. But it also taught me a valuable lesson about how cold the world can be. And it taught me self-reliance. As well as the value of time, how ephemeral everything is...

In the end, though, with all the deadbeat dads, child molesters, and far more grisly fates that could have befallen me or him, I think I'm fortunate to have had a loving, caring father, who, despite his temper, was a beautiful person and was highly devoted to me.

I'd rather have had a father like that for eight years than none at all. I feel forever blessed by the time I had with him...

It's still a sore subject for me, still a downer, a bummer. Occasionally people will ask about my family, parents, and the story will come up, and I'll have to relive it, talk about it, or sometimes, growing up, I'd compulsively lie, make up stories about my father, where he was, who he was, so I didn't have to tell the truth...

It's been decades since I visited his grave. I wonder how long it will be there, his grave.

(I even vaguely recall riding in the car with him and my mother, to the graveyard, to pick out the burial plot. I didn't understand quite why we were there, since I'd been told he wasn't dying, for sure. His impending death was still a semaphore. But, in recollection, I admire his bravery in venturing there, to that graveyard, to look at where he'd be buried. I can't imagine how difficult that must have been for him. The thoughts that must have gone through his head, peering down at that patch of grass...)

What a strange thing to do, have a grave. Why is it that we Occidentals do that? Why do we have tombstones? Why do we talk to tombstones? Why do we feel so entitled, as if we deserve more of the Earth than we've already cut? Why do we feel we should own this chunk of dirt for eternity?

Think of all the graves, burial places that've been built over, washed away. Someday there could be a shopping center or robot supply store there. Perhaps that graveyard replaced another graveyard. Perhaps a robot graveyard will replace it. A graveyard for cyborgs...

Or it could be washed away by rising seas, like what happened in Hurricane Katrina, to many graveyards. I can't ever forget the images I saw on TV during Hurricane Katrina, those graveyards flooding, coffins sailing down the flooded streets like small wooden boats. Flushed out of the ground.

This is part of why I wish to be cremated.

After my father's death, my mother met another man, maybe a year later. He, like my mother, a psychiatrist.

He was divorced, with two kids, a boy and girl, older than me.

They never formally married, just were with each other, my mother and me visiting his house over the weekends, in another suburb of Miami.

Then, shortly after, they bought a house and moved in together, which was tough for me, leaving the school I liked, leaving my neighborhood, childhood friends, everyone, everything I knew. It was a whole new loss, leaving there.

8

I had many friends in my neighborhood. There was Jake, whose older brother hated me and wanted me to beat me up and would call me a "faggot" before I even knew what that was.

It seemed like everybody's older brother back in those days was a sadistic prick.

I don't even remember his name, Jake's brother, but do remember his horse face and buckteeth and that he was a raging asshole.

It could be that he hated me because of the egg battle me and Jake had.

After school one day, when our parents were gone at work, I'm not sure who started it, but we raided our respective fridges and pelted each other and each other's houses with eggs.

Neither of our parents were thrilled to return home after a long day at work and see the house covered in slimy egg yolk, cracked shells lining the streets.

It was one of those times, as a kid, that I felt guilt, when my mother told me how eggs cost money, they weren't free, and that she'd gone to work, worked all day

so we had these to eat. Even as a kid, usually lacking empathy, I felt like a dirtbag for that, and we never had an egg battle again.

Jake and I both loved baseball. I recall him having the coolest Washington Senators jacket. His family had originally been from Washington DC.

We'd trade baseball cards. We'd talk of the Senators, Walter Johnson, famous baseball players from the past like Shoeless Joe, Ty Cobb, and Babe Ruth. There was something cooler about the old baseball players than the current ones, their big baggy pants, and the grainy black and white photos of them, the tall tales of their exploits.

Jake, like me, was into girls at a young age. He was a fellow lifelong admirer of the females, and it was with him that I saw my first Playboy magazine. It'd been stashed by his dad somewhere. In a locked bathroom, we perused the pages, as if archeologists discovering an oracle, and jaws agape, we gasped and wondered, in awe at the mature female form.

They were so shapely, the models, so curvaceous. They looked like girls but were so different than the girls at my school whose bald little snatches I gaped at and clumsily, cautiously touched.

I didn't know exactly what it was or why, but I liked them, I liked their nudity, their geometry.

I began masturbating young, not long after that, touching myself, fucking my pillow and poking holes in stuffed animals and pieces of fruit, but I didn't really have orgasms until later. Still, I enjoyed the act of fucking something, even a pillow, and loved fantasizing of engaging in sexual activities with naked women, and those pictures I saw at Jake's house, those images, those virgin glances at naked, developed female bodies remain etched into my memory forever.

Another friend I remember was Tim. He was a Black kid, from a less financially fortunate family.

Not that I was rich, but my mother being a shrink, she did okay, and my father, while around, did well too, well enough to provide a comfortable middle-class life.

Whereas I'm guessing Tim came from a lower economic stratum.

I know this because he was flabbergasted when he came over, saw my basement, which had many toys in it. He'd obviously never seen so many toys, likely because his parents didn't make enough money to provide them, or maybe didn't want to. I don't know.

We had a couple sleepovers at my house. I remember him vomiting one morning, on the stairs to the second floor. Nothing precipitated it. He simply looked at me with this confused glaze, slapped his hands to his stomach, hunched forward and upchucked.

I didn't see him for a while, other than at school, until one night, him and his mother came by my house.

His mother, her face rigid, eyes narrowed, angrily declared, "Tim has something to tell you," and she yanked him by his arm, thrust him from behind her, to face me.

A guilty looking Tim struggled to maintain eye contact and handed me a toy, a GI Joe figure, and whimpered, voice shaky, "I'm sorry I stole your toy."

I received it, wasn't sure how to respond. They left. I never hung out with him again.

Once at school, afterwards, he joked about it, saying how "remember the time I stole your toy," and we laughed about it, but his laugh was forced. It'd be ironic if he grew up to become a professional thief, bank robber, banker, or politician. But whatever became of him, I wish him well.

Another friend of mine was an older guy, who lived with his parents, I'm guessing he was in his 20s or so. A lean, tall, wiry Black man named Anthony. I remember his family lived around the corner from us. I think they were Haitian.

They had a gray dog, a runty, scruffy fleabag sack of shit called Ralph, which looked almost like an overgrown rat. And that dog would be out in their backyard, day and night, snapping, growling and barking incessantly. I recall really hating the animal, as it was so loud and annoying and had an ugly, mangy, and menacing appearance. Not to mention it stunk like shit, aside from always barking. Why is that the smallest dogs always seem to bark the loudest and most frequently?

Anthony, me, other kids, young guys would play basketball and baseball in the park nearby. When the Jehovah's Witness lady who'd been babysitting me left, or

I think got fired for getting too pushy and freaky with the Jesus, my parents asked Anthony to look after me when they were off at work and I wasn't in school.

Reflecting on it, I'm not sure why he was hanging with kids like 7, 8-years-old. It was unusual, I guess, but he wasn't a pedo, or anything like that, and he never touched me.

I do recall him having a strange proclivity, though. He'd rent "adult" movies from the video store (he wouldn't let me see the tape covers, but I'd see him sneak off into the "little room" in the back of the video store labelled 18+) and after I went to bed, he'd sit downstairs, in the living room, and watch the videos, I'm sure whacking off.

Since he lived with his parents, he probably couldn't jerk off freely at home, so it was a nice break for him, to sit in our living room, with his cock out, spanking his monkey to the porn. Back in those days, we didn't have smartphones and porn wasn't as easily available. Times were harder for wankers like him.

Not that I'm complaining, and I never told my parents about it. Not that I care. I'm sure he cleaned up, because I never saw cum or Vaseline on the couch or floor.

I'm lucky, too, he was a wanker and not a pedo. He was a nice fellow, really, a gentle giant. I'm not sure what became of him, but he abruptly stopped babysitting me. Maybe it was because I got old enough to be home alone, or maybe my parents returned from work to find him on our living room couch, hard cock in hand, doing the five-knuckle shuffle...

There was another kid who lived nearby, named Jonas.

He lived in a basement apartment with his mother, an attractive blond, a single mother.

Though attractive at first glance, there was something off-putting about her. She had a dark aura, a presence to her that was unnerving, and a foreign accent I couldn't place, but it reminded me of Dracula, like a female Dracula. Her skin was pale as bone, too. Maybe she did hail from Transylvania. I don't know. But I'd never seen anyone that pale in Miami. It was unnatural. The lady scared me more and more every time I saw her. I started to imagine her as one of the flesh-eating zombies.

She'd smoke cigarettes and drink vodka in the shadowy corner of their basement apartment, sitting there looking like something weird from a French film, and she and Jonas would share a bottle of water, drinking straight from the bottle, which, even then, I found gross.

She offered me a sip from the bottle, and I refused, which made her angry. She asked if I thought they had germs. I thought she probably did but was too polite to admit this and kept silent. She looked creepy, that lady, like a ghoul. There really was something off about her, the way she'd sit in the dark corner of their basement apartment, with her legs crossed, head tilted. The way she'd smoke and peer over at us, smoke purling from her nostrils. It was fucking demonic.

I'd liked Jonas, though. We'd bonded over WWF wrestling. Hulk Hogan, Roddy Piper, Andre the Giant. We, being kids, thought it was real, and loved it.

We'd imitate their moves, throw stuff, throw each other. It's amazing no one got killed or maimed.

But our friendship ended after the incident with the bottle. I think Jonas's mom took a serious dislike to me after that, was genuinely offended.

Later, Jonas and a few other kids ganged up on me after school, pelted me with fruit, chased me through the streets, but I was fast enough to outrun them.

I was bruised and bloodied but never told on them. Actually, it was the last time I saw him. I think him and his crazy mom moved somewhere else. Maybe his mom went to jail. I can see her being a criminal of some sort, a bank robber or drug dealer, or a check forger. Maybe it wasn't even his mom. Maybe she was a sick lady who'd kidnapped him and was molesting him. I could see that. She seemed evil. She just had a look of duplicity.

Jonas wasn't the best friend I could have had, but another guy, Peter, and his brother, Dave, were good people. We'd hang out, ride bikes, watch wrestling, play Nintendo, "Legend of Zelda," "Mario Brothers." They were solid people. They came out to my father's funeral.

I felt bad that I wasn't the best of friends to them. I was quite embarrassed to have eaten a handful of candy out of a Christmas decoration stuffed with chocolates, which were supposed to be eaten over the 12 days of Christmas.

They were to be eaten one day at a time, but, passing by, and being Jewish, not celebrating Christmas as more than an American holiday, I didn't know they were to be rationed, eaten slowly, and I ripped open the decoration and ate a few days' worth of the chocolate treats.

They were disappointed because it was a special thing they did as a family. It was one of the first times I can remember being disappointed with myself.

There was another time, too, with them, that I was incorrigible. We were on a long road trip, and I was sitting in the back of their station wagon. Nature was speaking to me, and I desperately had to piss.

I don't know why I didn't speak up, but for some reason, I let go, and pissed in the back, angling my dick, shooting the stream down into the trunk.

Amazingly, no one noticed, then and there, but I remember later, after I pissed in it, Peter complaining of how his parents' car stunk, that it smelled like "pickles."

I didn't admit it at that time and am finally confessing it to the world.

I pissed in that car.

It wouldn't be my first act of malfeasance, malevolence.

9

Besides peeing in cars, it was around this time I began to stay up later at night, watch horror movies. "Nightmare on Elm Street" and "Friday the 13th" instant favorites of mine. There was something so thrilling yet comforting about watching people chased and slashed to death. Horror movies, like heavy metal, have always been soothing to me, comforting me in times of distress.

I'd seen the movie "Firestarter" and then read the book. It was the first adult type of book I'd ever read. And oh, how it enthralled me! I was obsessed with fires for a short time, and I began to set things on fire. Mostly newspapers, in the back alley near my house. I loved to watch the paper burn and crumble. I even burned "Firestarter," the book, to see if it would give me telekinetic powers, like maybe I could steal, harness energy from the book.

Fuck, how I loved to see the orange flames dancing and moving about from the book's pages. The power and movement of the fire was so hypnotic!

Sadly, I didn't inherit the superpowers I wanted, so then, for a while, I wished I had a flamethrower and could shoot it people I didn't like or things I wanted to get out of my way.

After my fire phase, I got more into knives. I'd fantasize stabbing people, slashing them, decapitating or chopping people up like I'd see in the late-night horror films.

Often in movie theaters, I had these thoughts. Often about people whose head or hair was too big and blocked the screen. I'd imagine beheading them, hacking off their heads with an axe and then sitting back down and enjoying the film, eating my popcorn.

Fortunately, I kept these urges to myself, finding release in watching the horror movies and playing violent video games. Though I did continue physically attacking people, with my hands or feet, occasionally. Nasty sneak attacks...

Like a kid whose name I forgot, who was bending over to tie his shoe, in the hallway, outside our homeroom class. No one else was in the hallway, so, again being a hallway bandit, a berserker, I took it as a cue...

The kid had never done anything wrong to me. I didn't dislike him. But he was in a position of weakness, vulnerability. So I decided to attack him. I crept up behind him, clenched my hands together, again, like I was holding an axe, and I smashed his spine, as hard as possible, and ran away. He cried, "argh!" as I took off running. I didn't get caught for it.

I'd also chase cats. Every cat I saw, my own included, we had three, and all of them, I chased.

It became a compulsion. If I saw a cat, I had to chase it, and just chase it too. If I got it cornered, and it began to hiss, claw at me, I'd relent, leave it alone. It was more the chase of the animal that thrilled me than the catching of the animal.

My cats obviously hated me, would run, scurry off, hiss at me, anytime I was near. One cat tired of my shenanigans too, and ambushed me, pounced on my leg from

behind, scratching and clawing at me and scurried off, deftly ducking under a sofa where I couldn't reach it.

The ferocious little hellion! (Looking back, I soooo deserved it!)

Hell am I lucky those cats weren't the same size as me. People don't think about it, but a housecat is really no different from a lion. Both are predators. Anyone reading this might not think that their cat is a beast, they might not think Fluffy is a savage, that Fluffy would never hurt a living thing, but if Fluffy were the size of a lion, or the size of even a small human, Fluffy would claw you to a bloody carcass...

Fortunately, for me, our housecats were not the size of humans, nor were they lions or tigers.

I respect cats, I must say. Cats truly are incredible creatures and beautiful, elegant, graceful beings. Despite me probably terrifying the crap out of them, our cats would stalk the garden behind our house, kill birds and rats, leave the dead animals at our back doorstep, offerings to us, the cats' masters. What clever beasts! Super predators!

It sucked, I'm sure, when we moved, for our cats to leave our home, our neighborhood. It sucked for me too, to leave my childhood home, my neighborhood. I hated my mother for that, for making us move. My mother was always so strict. Sometimes I'd wish she had died instead of my father, and I feel absolutely disgusting for ever thinking that...

Before we left the house, my mother had a skylight built into my room. We'd sold the house to a pair of chubby lesbians, who were difficult and finicky about every stage of the sale, it being their first purchase of a property.

After the sale went through, a month or so after we'd moved out, one cold January morning, the skylight collapsed in my bedroom, seriously injuring one of the lesbians. It could have been me in that room. Maybe it was a ghost, or a karmic punishment meant for me, meant for me for chasing the cats, pissing in cars, throwing eggs, not drinking from the bottle, sucker-punching kids in the hallways...

10

We, my mother, me, my mother's partner, his two children, moved into a bigger house, two blocks from the house he'd been living in, in a Miami suburb, to start a new life.

The cats that I'd chased moved with us but pissed everywhere in the new house and were banished to the basement, not allowed out. The cats lived down there like subterranean beasts. Eventually they were euthanized. (Though I'm sure they were of the opinion I should have been the one euthanized.)

Upon moving into the new house, I continued my role of miscreant.

And while doing miscreant things, burning things, chasing our new housecats, I felt enjoyment, sure, but I wasn't sure why I did them.

Once, watching "Diff'rent Strokes," I saw Arnold get in trouble in school for throwing an eraser at a classmate. The next day I went to school, I also threw an eraser at a classmate and got in trouble for it. Was the TV to blame? I can't say. I'm sure I'd have committed another mischievous act if I hadn't thrown the eraser.

Doing these acts, these evil, stupid things, it sometimes was as if I wasn't the one doing it. Like there were ghosts, demons in me. I was now the zombie. I was the demons' being, I was their puppet, obeying their unspoken commands. There were times, too, it was an out of body experience, I was watching myself do it, observing my behaviors, indifferent to the mischief, an apathetic, yet deviant voyeur.

And more evil would transpire in the new house. Far, far more insidious than before...

We moved into a larger house, three storeys, an old, pale white, southern, Victorian style architecture type dwelling, with Grecian columns, and a wraparound front porch picture perfect for sipping mint juleps.

It had a gravel driveway and a small tropical backyard garden that was brimming with lantana, hibiscus, and bougainvillea flowers.

Being a somewhat big house, there was plenty of room for my mother and her partner, who I guess I can call my “stepfather,” a 50 something, stout man a few words. A man who bore a striking resemblance to the actor Fred Dreyfus, and who had two kids, both older than me, who I guess I can term a “stepbrother” and “stepsister,” the stepsister being the eldest.

The parents both wanted to work from home, not have to rent offices, and so each had a room in the house designated as an office, to see patients. There was even a tiny nook on the second floor, big enough to be used as a waiting room...

On the first floor, there was a vestibule, with an antique armoire. A narrow hallway led to what was a small kitchen, far smaller than you’d expect in a three storey house.

The kitchen had a pantry nearly the same size as the kitchen itself. Perhaps not the most efficient use of space, design.

To the right of the kitchen was a large dining room, which was rarely used. Neither of my parents cooked much because they worked so often. Nor did they eat at home much; mostly they ate out, in restaurants, often at a local Chinese restaurant that my parents dined at so frequently they named it “The House of Boring.”

My stepfather was constantly on call for a mental hospital he did rounds at, in addition to his private practice, and would eat at the hospital a lot, in addition to “The House of Boring.”

My mother taught a couple classes at a local university, in addition to her private practice; sometimes she’d eat at home, cooking mostly vegetables and lentils, which she’d cook for me, too- until we moved into the new house.

Once we moved in, my mother proclaimed that she’d be too busy with work and couldn’t cook anymore. My stepsiblings and I were ordered to use the microwave, and attempt to learn to cook for ourselves, or use our allowance to eat out.

Mostly we ate out. Tons of pizza especially. We’d frequent the local pizza parlor so much that I got to know the family that ran it, the owner being an immigrant from Sicily, his son a former U of Miami offensive lineman, nicknamed “Bam Bam.”

I'll never forget Bam Bam. He was a larger than life character. And really, he was larger than life, 6 foot something and pushing three bills. Yet, despite being a walking mountain, he was jovial, a wisp of a smile always crossing his lips. His babyface and red puffy cheeks and flattop haircut somehow making him more cuddly than threatening.

The first time I walked into the pizza parlor, again, I'm not sure why, thinking back on it, though I believe it's because of CTE or TBI from my car accident, or my demons, or PTSD, maybe a cocktail of all of them, but the first time I went in there, I waltzed in like Clint Eastwood, and saw Bam Bam, all three hundred pounds of him, working the counter, taking customers' orders.

I swaggered straight up to him, this mountain of a man, and started busting his balls. I'm this nine-year-old kid, this pipsqueak, and I'm calling him "fatboy" and cracking fat jokes.

He was shocked. This runt, this little shit, fucking with him, there in the store, and everyone there, all his friends, friends of friends, were shocked, pointing and laughing.

He snarled and stepped away from the counter. Towering over me, he seized me, his meaty paws under my tiny armpits and he hoisted me airborne, pinned me up to the cold, humming refrigerator and was like: "So what do you say now?"

I only laughed, and I knew deep down he wouldn't do much more than that. However, after being hoisted to the Heavens in such fashion, I did relent my verbal abuse.

Amazingly, after that, we became close. I think on some level Bam Bam respected that I'd had the gumption to step to him. Not many did. And we quickly bonded, as we both liked a lot of the same action movies.

Bam Bam, his dad, mom, sister, became like a second family to me. I got to know them well. I got to know and would joke around with the guys in the kitchen. They were good people. They looked after me, called me out on my bullshit, pushed me to do well in school, pushed me to join a local little league baseball team. And during this time, with Bam Bam assuming a positive role in my life, I halted my malicious activities, mostly.

For the first few years at the new house, I didn't get into too much trouble. But later I did. It was around puberty that the demons returned, and I was back in the demons' claws, back to being a delinquent, a devious zombie.

And right as I started fucking up, at age thirteen, Bam Bam, and later his father, accosted me on the street, and once in the restaurant, getting into my face, because they'd heard of me smoking cigarettes, being a hoodlum.

Of course, at the time, I laughed it off, was a smartass, but now, looking back at it with the wisdom of time and age, I'm grateful to them for caring.

Tragically, Bam Bam, being so overweight, died young, from heart failure.

He wasn't even thirty and had suffered a similar fate that's befallen many former football players. The game, the lifestyle of an offensive lineman taking its toll.

For many years after, a memorial picture of him hung in that pizza parlor, hanging atop the spot he always sat.

After he died, I didn't go back there for many years. It was too difficult, but later I did, and I would sit in his seat, underneath his picture.

I wonder what would have happened if he'd not died. He could have been the older male figure, a positive role model that I needed; perhaps he could have stopped my downward spiral.

It was unfortunate my stepbrother couldn't be that guy. He never cared about me. He bullied and teased me, beat me, grabbed me and farted in my face. Yet another sadistic older brother prick. (Seriously, why was every older brother so malicious back in those days?)

My stepfather, too, didn't want to be that guy. He never gave much of a fuck. He was never around, always working, and when he was around, he was taciturn, remote, physically and mentally abusive as well.

He'd return in the evenings, after seeing crazy people, seriously mental, suicidal, psychotic, schizophrenic sorts, and he'd retire to our living room, listen to blaringly loud opera, sitting with his eyes closed, chewing ice cubes. There he'd sit, alone, and I guess that room was perfect for solitude as it was at the far end of the first floor, behind the living room and kitchen, and had been built, before we

moved in, as an addition to the house, and was rather large and spacious and had sprawling panoramic windows and vaulted ceilings, as well as a potbelly stove that didn't make much sense in Miami...

(The house had burned down, partially, many years ago; its backyard bigger at the time; a horse stable in the house's rear had caught ablaze, spreading its way to the house.)

((I always wondered if anyone died in the fire, because I'd be home alone and would hear strange noises, footsteps, doors slamming, and once a strange light hovered above me, while I was in bed, and floated through the ceiling. I told my stepsister about it, and she and her friend had seen the exact same thing. Was it a real ghost or a mental demon? Paranormal energy? Demons must come from somewhere, right?))

Back to my stepfather, it's true what they say about psychiatrists. They are some of the most fucked up people.

He had a twisted upbringing, though, so it's sort of understandable why he'd himself have mental issues, and why he'd want to pursue his profession. Perhaps he wanted to fix himself?

His story is graphic. As a child, his mother had serious mental health issues. She and his father divorced when he was young, and my stepfather stayed with his mother, who, as well as having mental issues, was a raging alcoholic.

His mother was perpetually drunk. She'd frequent local bars and bring home lots of strange men, a couple of whom would slap my stepfather around.

His earliest memories were of his mother, drunk, cooking horrible food, forcing him to eat the burned slop, and herself slapping, abusing and tormenting him.

(And for this reason, he'd always had a difficult relationship with food, never wanting to cook, eat at home, in part because of these traumatic childhood memories involving his mother's cooking...)

When he was eight, his mother killed herself, and he discovered her dead body, upon coming home from school, finding her in the kitchen, face down, on the ugly, lime green tile floor, his mother's cold body lying next to a kitchen table full of burned food, empty bottles of pills and liquor.

After that, he went to live with his father, who was a nice, decent man, and like him, a man of few words. His father was a cigar smoker who liked opera, guns, and 1930s classic cars. His father didn't say much, but they had a positive, if not unexpressive relationship, and they'd bonded, sort of, over guns.

From his father, my stepfather learned to shoot guns at a young age and continued the hobby for the rest of his life. One of the few times I bonded with him was when he took me to the target range and taught me to shoot, when I was about ten.

Aside from that, we didn't talk a whole lot. He'd be gone most of the day, and when he was home, he was seeing patients, and the door to his office was closed, with a white noise machine in the hallway outside his office door, whirring loudly, swallowing sound.

Most of what I remember was him in the evenings, sitting in the living room, with his eyes closed, chewing on ice cubes, as he listened to booming, dramatic opera on his expensive, elaborate stereo system...

Like his mother, he himself was an alcoholic. He went to AA meetings, the meetings being one of the only other times I went with him anywhere.

I remember those meetings; how smoky the rooms were. It was as if the folks there had traded alcohol addiction for nicotine. And caffeine. Good heavens, if everyone wasn't drinking coffee, guzzling it. Though, given their stories, it was probably a worthy tradeoff.

It was quite something as a kid to hear those stories. One guy, who looked like an alligator, saying he'd been so blitzed that he one morning woke up inside a mailbox. I'm still not sure how anyone other than a waif could fit into a mailbox, and he was no waif.

The thing that struck me most about the meetings was the applause they'd give for chips, especially the 24-hour chip, how uproariously they'd hoot and holler and applaud for those who'd first sobered up. The camaraderie was endearing.

One could think that hearing the plethora of alcohol induced horror tales would stop me from fucking up later in life. They didn't...

That first year or two in the house was okay. It wasn't until later that my stepfather's darker side came out.

My stepbrother was the usual "big brother" type of jerk, openly abusive and terrorizing. But my stepfather was more aloof. It wasn't until later, around the third year we lived together, he became hostile to me.

I once broke a window, by accident, and he picked me up, slung me over his shoulder, carried me up to the room I shared with my stepbrother and slammed me, like a sack of potatoes to the floor. On the way up, I punched him in the nuts, which may have precipitated him throwing me as he did.

Fortunately, I wasn't paralyzed by the incident, though I well could have been.

I threatened to call the police on him, and my stepsister rushed upstairs and told me that if I did, she'd kill me, and I could tell that she meant it by her icy glare.

I told my mom about it, but she had no reaction, was like a zombie, had nothing to say, shrugged her shoulders and walked off. She too had become rather aloof, was consumed with work. I think my father's ordeal, death, drained her capacity for emotion...

I found out later from my stepbrother that my stepfather bragged and joked about throwing me to the floor, mimicking my cries, his throwing motion to his kids' joy and delight. It wasn't a nice feeling hearing that.

There were a couple more times when I caused mischief, and he chased after me, threatening to beat me, but I was quicker and got away. Once I ran over to my friend's house and stayed there, but his mom kicked me out when his little sister complained about something I said to her, which I don't remember.

I wasn't welcome there any longer, at that house, and wasn't feeling very welcome or safe in my own house.

I thought of running away, going to live with a relative. But I only heard from my aunt and uncle sporadically and the rest of my dad's family had disappeared. My mother didn't have any family that she spoke with, so there wasn't really anywhere for me to go.

(My mother's father was a great guy, beloved by all, and a successful businessman, who for a short time was a screenwriter for Columbia Pictures, though he was blacklisted for once attending a Communist Party Meeting, partly out of curiosity, although more because he was chasing a girl there. A heavy smoker, he died when I was only 4, so I never got to know him.)

((My mother's mother, also a heavy smoker, died shortly after. She'd been a debutante and housewife. And was a Depression Era child and hardass to my mom, lashing her relentlessly with a belt, slapping her and castigating her. Their relationship was forever frayed, dark, and my mother rarely spoke with her after she finished college. My mother cut ties with the rest of the family after her mother's death...))

I guess I was following in the family tradition of difficult, fractured households. And it was scary. It was a scary feeling, a lonely feeling. A terrible feeling. To be a child, so vulnerable, powerless, and living with hostile people.

(Throughout all this, though, I'd listen to heavy metal, watch Headbanger's Ball on MTV, watch horror movies, and the slasher films and metal videos comforted me, were a testament to the power of music, film and their astounding ability to console, heal, and alleviate psychic pain...)

When I told my mother how horrible my stepfamily was, she replied by saying how she had a patient who was chained to a radiator at four-years-old and whipped with an electric cord and raped.

I guess my mom did have a point. Suffering, to a degree, is relative...

And these times weren't all bad, either. My summers were wonderful, since I'd spend them in summer camps, which were sort of like prisons for middle class kids, holding tanks for us while our parents got some deserved R&R.

These were largely enjoyable times, spent riding horses, camping. The biggest menace there were the occasional camp counselor, sadistic older brother type, who'd beat and torment campers, as well as the wasps that attacked me once, by the camp convenience store. The insects swarming out like a horde of Mongols and stung me all around my head and back. I ran, in tears, and in stinging, electric pain, with wasps still on my shirt, to the dining hall, where a tall, gentle giant of a camp counselor, one of the good ones.

(A guy who'd nearly died recently from pissing on an electric fence and had also been struck by lightning once while chasing a horse.)

The giant ran out and swatted the wasps away, saved me from further onslaught.

It was great, though, mostly, those days at camp. Hiking in the wilderness, off in nature, learning to ride a horse and riding horses through the woods. Playing tennis and lacrosse and golf.

There was much camaraderie there, too, living in a bunk full of guys, cracking jokes, and we'd dance around, lip-syncing to Motley Crue, generally being little animals.

It was so free, then, running around, the freedom of being a kid, having so few responsibilities. The saying "Youth is wasted on the young" is certainly true to an extent. We didn't know how good we had it. No taxes, kids, jobs, stress...

Although if we knew how limited time was, how much life, the world would change, would youth have been as fun? Or would it have been more like standing on a beautiful beach, under a clear sky, knowing a tsunami would soon arrive...

The camp was up in rural New York state, and I remember how clean the air was, how crisp and cool it'd be, how fresh it smelled in the forest when we'd hike.

Those were fantastic days, those times. When camp would end, we'd hug, talk about "keep in touch," everyone at the camp, my bunkmates, friends, and counselors, and we would, for a bit, but I eventually lost touch with everyone.

There were kids there from every part of the country, even other countries, even a girl from Austria, who was amazingly gorgeous, and I remember having a crush on her. Little did I know she wouldn't be the first Austrian to enter my life... More on that later...

Going back home would always be rough, but at least I had my TV to keep me company. We didn't have TV at the camp, which was probably for the better.

Other than the joy of being reunited with my dear TV, it'd suck to be back. But I'd manage, find things to do, besides watching TV, like school, playing sports, riding bikes, playing video games, reading, learning guitar, and working odd jobs in the neighborhood, mowing lawns to earn a bit of extra pocket money.

Things soon improved when my stepbrother left to live full time with his mom, leaving me with a room to myself, and eventually, my stepfather and I froze into a détente.

We ceased speaking until one morning, when I was 14.

More on that later, but first, a bit about my drug use, which factored heavily into how and why my stepfather and I had our first talk in years, a talk that remains our last, to this day...

11

People might say marijuana is a “gateway” drug, but I believe cigarettes, tobacco to be far more so of a “gateway” drug.

Tobacco was the first drug I tried. I remember, at age 11 or 12, the first cigarette I smoked; a Marlboro light that I’d stolen from my stepsister. It tasted so smooth, so good, its flavor, and it gave me this euphoric buzz. I loved the smell of tobacco before it was smoked too, the smell of cigarettes in the pack. I’d sniff and breathe in the fragrant pouches, the cigarette packs I’d find while snooping in my stepsister’s room when she wasn’t around.

Smoking cigarettes made me want to try more drugs, too, harder drugs, and seeing so many drugs done in movies, on TV, drugs to me looked so cool... So rock n’ roll...

I’d been smoking cigarettes, regularly, starting at age 13, then took to weed, smoking a joint, on the roof of an abandoned building, with my friend. My friend had gotten the joint off his older brother that night, which, coincidentally, was Halloween. That first time I’d smoked weed, I didn’t feel it, didn’t catch much of a buzz.

(Perhaps it would have been better if I did, because my friend and I went out smashing pumpkins afterwards, and we trashed a Halloween display a little girl had set up, and the little girl watched us destroying it, from her living room window, and was traumatized, ran and told her parents, and somehow they knew we did it.)

((The parents, I guess, must have seen us, or the little girl knew us, and the girl's parents called our parents, and her parents berated our parents, saying the little girl was having nightmares, night terrors about us kicking and smashing her beloved pumpkin she'd carved, and the girl's parents threatened to call the police if we again trespassed and attacked their property... If only that weed would have been stronger, maybe none of this would have happened... I wonder if to this day, the girl still has nightmares about that, and if she has a Halloween phobia...))

The second time I smoked weed, the buds were far more potent, I guess, and it hit me like a brick to the face. It was almost as strong as an acid trip. I felt like God and saw wonderful colors, everything silhouetted in neon green lines. It was intense but somehow peaceful. It was chill and beautiful.

I'd had much better experiences with weed than I had with drinking. Weed just mellows me out, though at times does make me lazy, catatonic, and while drinking never made me violent, like it did to others, it did sicken me if I drank too much.

Like the first time I got stinky drunk. There was a Japanese restaurant around the corner from my house, and I'd seen they'd kept stacks of beer, in six packs, and boxes, near an exit door in the back, next to the bathrooms. My young criminal mind, my demons knew it would be quite easy for someone to sneak a six pack from there, either in a backpack or stashing it outside the backdoor.

I chose the latter. I'd gone there with my friend and his parents and had went to the bathroom and afterwards had quickly grabbed a sixer and stashed it outside the backdoor. Then I made up an excuse to leave early, went back behind the restaurant, grabbed the sixer, stole off running like a bandit. I must have been 13 at the time.

Later that night, we, two other friends and I, drank the beers. The beers, Budweiser, cans, were warm, and tasted like piss. As does all Budweiser, in my opinion, but it's even worse warm.

My friends hated the stuff, gagged, contorted their faces and spit the suds out after only a few sips, then chucked their cans into the garbage and quit imbibing.

But me, I was able to stand the horrific taste and guzzled my can empty, then put the rest to my face and downed the three remaining cans in quick order.

At first, I didn't feel anything. I remember us, my friends and I, hanging at this playground, on the swings, talking shit, joking around, smoking menthol cigarettes, which I'd taken a liking to...

Then it hit me, the drunkenness, hard, and, having trouble standing upright, I decided to stumble home, which was only a couple blocks away, so I could lie down and pass out. But before I could make it too far, I felt an acidic burst, a powerful surge in my throat. I clutched my stomach before I keeled and purposely vomited on the front door of the community recreation center I'd been staggering by.

On the short walk home, I must have vomited three or four more times. On the sidewalk. In a front yard or two. Once on a car, I think.

I can't remember if it rained later that night, but I hope it did, to wash away the puke, or else my neighbors, and a janitor or a city worker had some terrible surprises awaiting them the next day... I can only imagine the contorted looks of horror coloring the faces of the recreation center staff when they arrived to work the next morning, seeing that front door covered in chunky pink puke...

More puke arrived, for me, when I came home, and I upchucked so many times that my stomach emptied. Then I dry-heaved a handful of times until I finally passed out. I learned a lesson from that experience, though, and have since only thrown up (from alcohol) maybe once or twice more and nothing to that extent. I learned that night the power of alcohol, and even if I've abused it, I've always known my limits with the potion and have always recognized the point in which I'm happily drunk and in no need of more.

Alcohol I've done in moderation, but weed I'd smoked voluminously, for many years. I loved how it mellowed me out, relaxed me, helped me sleep. I'm elated that it's legal in many states. It's long overdue. It should be legal everywhere, I posit, that beautiful plant...

Acid I'd done a few times and loved, but it lasted too long. At a certain point, I just wanted it to be over. I only had one bad trip, after taking a blend of LSD that was a carbon copy of one of the most powerful batches from the 1960s.

It was even supposedly concocted by an old hippy dude chemist from Cali, a Deadhead, touch of gray, ponytail type. And damn, this stuff was potent. And

clean. It wasn't cut with any strychnine or other impurities. It was uncut, pure LSD.

The first part of my trip on it was amazing. I saw crazy colors and hung out with a group of my friends, having a blast. We were tripping balls and watched the movie "Look Who's Talking" with the talking babies, and it was the funniest thing we'd ever seen. I think one really does have to be tripping on quality LSD to understand that film. Seriously.

But, tragically, I had to return home because I'd gotten Saturday morning detention for skipping school. And I did. I left the comfort of my friend's warm house and ventured out into the dark, cold night.

On the walk back home, I saw many older people returning from work, all were dressed in suits and ties and trench coats because it was a slightly chilly January evening.

The trench coat people all looked the same. Like part of an organization. The True Trench Coat Mafia. And their cars, the cars on the road, their burning headlights, in the black of night, they all looked the same, looked evil, like the eyes of Florida panthers that'd been infected by nuclear radiation.

When I got back home, I was alone in my room.

It was terrifying, though, being alone, seeing such wild images as I was hallucinating. I was seeing floating discs and orbs, explosions of bright bold neon colors, and everything in the room appeared as if it were melting. The neon green lines, encasing and silhouetting everything were back, and more effulgent than ever. But the most horrifying thing was my blanket. My blanket looked like a dark-faced monster, a demonic octopus that was trying to eat me.

I just lay in my bed, curled into a ball, shivering, hoping the blanket monster wouldn't eat me. I stayed up most of that night, huddled in a mass of panic, thinking my room, the walls would melt into me, wash me away like a wave. That my blanket really was a monster. And I kept hearing strange voices in languages I didn't understand but I knew were malicious. Maybe were alien communications. That maybe the aliens would invade, and I'd be the first to know.

There was a point in this, when I first got home, too, that I received a telemarketing call from a person selling vacuum cleaners. Enraged, I cursed him out. I thought he could be one of the trench coat people or a nuclear panther and I hurled invective at him.

He yelled back at me, saying he knew where I lived, and so I panicked later that night that the vacuum cleaner man would show up, crawl in through my bedroom window, brandishing a vacuum cleaner like a machine gun. That he'd attack me with the vacuum cleaner, use it to suck away my soul. The telemarketing motherfucker could have been a trench coat vampire or one of the aliens.

I did finally sleep, late late late into the night or early at the asscrack of dawn, I slept, and woke to my mother slapping on my door and screaming my name in a shrill, belligerent voice. She demanded I go to Saturday morning detention and that I be more of a normal human being.

Dragging myself from my bed, I complied, if only to get her to leave me alone, stop hearing her shrill voice, her shrieking of my name and her berating me.

When I got to Saturday morning detention, I was still damn near tripping balls, but had settled down some, was mostly feeling hungover. Alcohol has never given me too much of a hangover, but acid does. The next day after I trip, I have throbbing headaches, body aches, feel like utter shit.

In the Saturday morning detention, in my math classroom, sat four or five other kids. One was a gang member, a crack dealer who'd pulled a gun on my friend and threatened to kill me at one point, though through a mutual friend, we'd patched things up, as I had nothing to do with the beef he had with my friend (that friend I'd fallen out with, too, later, partially because he was a dumbass and partially because he'd gotten violent crack dealers angry with me).

The crack dealer, slouching in his chair, his head thrown back, was casually telling a story of how, at his other school, he and five of his classmates had raped a pretty young female teacher after school. He smiled as he told the story, as if he were proud of it. It disturbed me and the other kids there, visibly disturbed us all, and being so fucked up, if I had a gun, I might have shot him.

I don't know what happened to that kid. I'm guessing with his trajectory in life, he's dead or in jail, and he deserves to be.

The Saturday morning detention, that morning, that night, was a fucking buzzkill, a real downer after what had begun as a tremendous and joyous acid trip.

Though, aside from that unfortunate occasion, my other trips were far better, usually involving friends, sitting around, listening to music, playing video games or watching movies and laughing our asses off...

Mushrooms I had only positive experiences with, had taken a few times, and they'd make me laugh like a lunatic, even harder than LSD, but often they'd make me catatonic, but in a good way, a fun way, shrouding me in a cocoon of tranquility, relaxation. They never gave me a hangover, either.

Once my friend and I, the one who'd smoked my first joint with me, we ate shrooms and sat in the woods, watched nature. We were with a couple other friends, who weren't tripping, and they left us out there, went to pick up food, and came back to get us, 15 minutes later. It'd seemed, though, like they'd been gone for years, when they returned, and that was okay. We were so happy to see them, hugged them like soldiers returning from war...

12

Which leads me back to my stepfather, I'd taken mushrooms, tripped balls at a Grateful Dead show. (At this juncture, my friends and I had moved from metal to grunge to classic rock).

At the Dead show we scored primo shrooms in the parking lot. Actually, me and another guy had gotten real ones, while my other friends, in another part of the parking lot, had lamentedly gotten fakes.

It was an incredible show, however, and we had shit-tons of weed to smoke. We saw the Steve Miller Band open the show, and The Dead, still with Jerry Garcia, played "Casey Jones" live for the first time in over a decade. The place erupted.

The whole concert was beautiful. Not only musically, but it had such a peaceful vibe. Everyone was grooving, chilling. There were Deadheads, stoners, hippies in hacky sack circles; everybody was having fun.

There were no fights. No guns. No aggro-bullshit, just happy friendly people. Only negative, besides my friends getting ripped off with those fake shrooms, was these two older girls, twenty-somethings, seeing my friends and me smoking weed and chastising us for being too young to smoke weed. They weren't wrong. Probably.

It was nonetheless an amazing evening that lasted way into the early morning. I'm not sure how I got home, but when I did, my mother was angry at me for something, what, I don't know, but I'm sure I deserved it. I still wasn't a normal human being...

I was ranting, groggy, high off the shrooms, and I began cursing about my stepfather, who was downstairs, listening to loud classical music, banshee shriek opera. It's not until this moment that I realize the irony of a kid's cavil complaining about his parents' loud music!

(Usually it was them forcing me to turn down the Motley Crue or NWA and lamenting my taste in oeuvre!)

So I was screaming about my stepfather and his shitty opera and he came storming upstairs, burst into the room with my mom and me and angrily declared that I ought to "say what I'm saying to his face."

And I did. Years of pent up rage seethed out. It was the end of détente.

We'd not even talked in years, since the incident where he slammed me to the floor. He'd given me the perpetual cold shoulder. We'd pass by each other in the kitchen, hallway, and he'd not say a single word to me, or me to him.

But he was talking to me then. And I talked back. I stood up to him, was ready to fight him, told him so directly, raised my voice to him, threatened him. Told him, in no uncertain terms, "fuck you."

He was no large man, maybe 5'8, not muscular or anything, and I was about the same height, but skinny. If I were a betting man, I'd put my cash on him to beat my ass, in all likelihood.

He didn't, though. He completely backed down. With a look of utter shock, he said, meekly, in a cracking voice, that he'd "call the police" if I touched him. It was quite the reversal.

He sulked away and our détente resumed. It was, to this day, and probably will forever be, the last time we shared words.

A couple years later, he and my mom split up, and he left the house.

Around when he moved, he'd recently bought a new cat (his previous one, called "Gidget" had died. Gidget, a super furry Maine Coon Cat, an adorable looking cat, was the meanest fucking animal I'd ever come across. She would hiss, scratch, run away from anyone who came near her, except my stepfather and stepsister. My stepsister said it was because my stepbrother had tormented the cat when it was a kitten. Perhaps he enjoyed chasing cats as much as me! But given what a sadistic prick he was, I believe it was more sinister...)

My stepfather's new cat was raised by me. And I took good care of it. Never chased it. I loved it!

She, the cat, was a gem. An Abyssinian cat, a purebred. She was muscular, lean, not an ounce of fat on her. That cat was more like a dog. She could actually play fetch! She was a cute, loving, amazing little creature, loyal, and caring. My favorite pet I'd ever had.

I'd wanted to keep her, but my stepfather, who'd never paid much attention to the cat (not that I blamed him for that; he worked like crazy, with crazies) but I'd raised the cat and wanted to keep it. I offered to buy the cat, then my mom offered to buy the cat from him, but he refused. Basically, it was his possession, and that was that.

I remember when the movers arrived to collect his things. The movers caging and removing the cat. I remember seeing her face full of fear and hearing her whimpering cries. I felt so impotent, not able to do anything to save her. It was traumatic, having her ripped away. It was like losing a family member, which a beloved pet is, when you think about it...

He didn't remarry, my stepfather. Or my mother, she didn't, either. They both saw other people. My mother brought home a string of weird, annoying men, one of whom had this terrible facial scar from skin cancer and would sit in his boxers at the kitchen table, making me terribly uncomfortable.

In their later years, they reunited, adhering to the popular “Living Apart Together” movement.

They live in separate houses, in separate cities, but talk almost daily, and see each other for extended visits every couple of months.

My stepfather had moved to Maine, which, intentionally, is as far up the US coast as one can get from Miami, and he lived, worked at a mental hospital there for many years, wishing to escape the heat and pressure of Miami, and live in an idyllic, quiet place. Finally see the snow he’d dreamed about seeing.

(Apparently, he’d loved snow, after seeing it in Christmas movies. But he never saw it, being a Miamian. Aside from those like me, who’d visited NYC, seen cold and snow, to many Miamians, snow is this exotic, beautiful thing... So he wished to live somewhere it snowed, somewhere the absolute polar opposite of Miami, somewhere he could enjoy the white Christmases he’d seen in movies, I guess... Back when he was in Miami, I remember that every Christmas, if not working, he’d celebrate the holiday by checking into a hotel, alone, and locking himself in the room and not coming out until Christmas was over. Not sure if he still does that...)

As of this writing, he’d moved to California, was living in San Francisco, renting an apartment, a garage apartment, in the back of his ex-wife’s, his first wife’s, house.

Nearly 83, it’s been tough for him, in a place where he has no friends, no roots, not much to do.

He moved there to be with his daughter and her children, to be the grandfather, help raise the kids. Perhaps he’s doing it to make up for the lost time, the time he missed while working, tending to other people’s issues instead of his own issues and his kids’.

13

My mother, ever the analyst, said that, in the greatest irony the universe could throw at someone, my stepfather had been dealt a situation beyond belief.

He got into psychiatry to help save people, after seeing his mother's decay and demise.

And his son, besides being a prick as a kid, turned out okay. Never got in trouble. Works as a gourmet chef for a high-end hotel chain, married a wonderful girl, a scientist, got a condo on the beach in San Diego...

But his daughter, oh my, did she ever have her own decay, and demise.

And, terribly, the saga has continued. Nowadays his granddaughter, Emily, at age 13, as of this writing, has begun her own chapter of misery, already drinking, doing drugs, and cutting herself...

As tragic as this is, somehow I can't imagine Emily turning out worse than her mother, my stepsister, Sandy. Hell, I really hope she doesn't.

Sandy was a normal, well-adjusted young girl, until roughly age 13 (definitely an unlucky age, number for this family). It was then she began experimenting with drinking, smoking, and drugs.

She had a line of boyfriends, too. The first I can remember was a muscle-bound dude, of mixed Asian, Black ethnicity, called "Mark."

I believe he was on steroids.

He and Sandy would constantly fight, be at one another's throats.

Mark once stormed into my room and offered to pay me five dollars if I informed him about any guys coming by to see Sandy. I wasn't sure how to reply. I didn't say anything, and Sandy, blue eyes bulging, burst in and dragged him by his 17-inch biceps back to her room to resume their bickering, and I could hear the murmurs of their screaming bleeding through the walls.

Unsurprisingly, the amorous pair broke up soon after that.

Then there were many other guys, mostly Black guys, including one who was a well-known Miami crack dealer.

Sandy smoked crack a few times, tried other hard drugs, but mostly, in those days, she drank. A lot. Later, she got into heroin, though, bad, and she and her boyfriend of the moment robbed a 7-Eleven at gunpoint, stole a car, and she got locked up in a federal prison for a few years.

It wasn't her first time locked up. She'd been expelled from several high schools as a teen. Finally, she'd been sent to what was termed a "Level 6" school, after punching a teacher in the face.

It was basically a lockdown facility, a stepdown from juvenile hall. (She'd been locked up in juvenile hall for a short bid too, following her arrest for punching the teacher's face.)

At the Level 6 facility, this lockdown school for fuckups, she had to live on site, confined to a room with bars on the windows, forced onto medication, and allowed only to leave on holidays or weekends that she "earned."

She'd occasionally run away from the facility, jumping walls, escaping for a time, to live with boyfriends or friends and party, but would invariably return after a few days of drunken recklessness.

At the school she got in trouble for maiming two boys, at the same time, thrashing them with a steel metal lunch tray, then with her fists and feet. One of the boys was beaten so badly that his nose was broken. The other had his testicles severely damaged after she stomped on them, like a female incarnation of Mike Tyson, stomping on his children... (Though I'm not sure if she bit any ears off...)

The boys, she said, had been trying to sexually harass her, and they were taught a harsh lesson about bothering this particular girl.

After hearing that story, I also learned a lesson that I shouldn't push her too far, if at all. When she threatened to kill me for calling the cops on her dad, after he'd assaulted me, I could see in her eyes that she meant it. She likely would kill me.

However, unwisely, I pushed my luck with her, one time, later, and had sprayed her a few times, playfully, with a water gun.

She told me to quit, but I didn't, and she made it clear I should have rethought that.

She snatched the plastic water gun, the toy, from my hands, and raised it like a whip and lashed and thrashed me with it, bashed it at my head, my arms and back, smashing it to bits, its serrated edges slashing, cutting into me as she pummeled my bitch ass that'd huddled up into a curled ball of fear on the floor.

Although I was scared and although it hurt, and I was bloodied, had long, jagged deep cuts on my arms, I did also find it uproariously amusing, laughing the whole time as she beat me. That, then and there, though, was the last time I fucked with her.

I did, growing up, want to fuck with her, in another way.

Albeit violent and crazy, I'll admit that she was a rather attractive girl.

Okay, I'll confess it. She was hot. She was a bleach blond, with rosy cheeks, translucent blue eyes, and an oval face. She had a slim figure but a jiggly, shapely ass and succulent thighs and big, firm and pointy, tubular tits.

For a boy coming into puberty, having an older stepsister like that, especially one who banged tons of dudes, dressed slutty, in tight-fitting miniskirts, tons of makeup, yeah, of course I wanted to fuck her and began masturbating furiously to the thought of it.

Would fucking her have been so wrong? She was my stepsister. Not a blood relative. Although later, as I aged and found girlfriends, my thoughts of banging her abated.

There was one time when I felt like I was close to having sex with her, though, for real.

It was, ironically, the same day I lost my virginity.

I'd lost it to this girl at school, Cindy, who was known as the school slut.

She'd been with lots of dudes. Her face was a train wreck, a Pippi Longstocking gone terribly wrong. A horrific ginger face. But her body. Holy fuck. It was incredible. She was half-Black and half-White and got the best of the Black girl body, juicy tits and a healthy, wide, rippling, round ass.

I almost fucked her at this shuttered recreation center that'd later be converted into a writer's center. My friends and I would go there often, break things, spray-paint the place, and smoke cigarettes. Once we set a bonfire there and nearly burned the place down.

(Someone saw the fire and called the cops. When they showed up, sirens blazing, we tore off running, fast as Usain Bolt. Amazing how police in pursuit, chasing

you, enables such superhuman running and athletic ability. We easily outran the fat, mustachioed cops. Disappeared like ghosts into our neighborhood, of which we knew every nook and cranny...)

That old building I'd spray-painted and nearly burned down was also the first spot I smoked weed, and so of course this abandoned, vandalized building was the perfect place to take my date!

I'm not even sure how we wound up getting together. But somehow we'd started talking on the phone, landlines, as this was way before the days of cellphones, texting, online much of anything, and every school published a phonebook, with every student's name, phone number, and address.

(In reflection, what a fucking stupid thing to do! Especially with what shitbags kids can be! Passing out that personal information... This was, in essence, virtually asking for prank calls, harassment. Which, yes, I participated in...)

This was also a goldmine for talking to girls. You had everyone's phone number!

And I guess I must have called the girl, Cindy. Or maybe she called me, because sometimes that'd happen too. Girls would call me, randomly, and we'd talk on the phone, but mostly it was me calling them- I was a slut, too, a slutty boy...

(What a time it was, back before smartphones; when you'd call a girl or whomever and you'd never know if he/she was there, who'd answer.)

However it came about, I was the one to set up a date, I remember that. I'd asked her to come "hang out." She accepted.

We met at this shopping mall down the street from my house, where I'd hang out at a record store, often, buying lots of tapes.

(Writing this in 2019/2020, I can't help but feel how dated this is. The early 90s, record stores, tapes, CDs! I had an amazing collection of tapes and CDs, mostly metal and rap...)

We went from the record store, made our way over to the abandoned building, and quickly began making out, and I pulled up her shirt, checked out her tits, cupped them. They were so large, soft, and incredible. So fully and delightfully developed.

I almost tore off the rest of her clothes and fucked her right there, her back propped against that cement wall that I'd covered in graffiti. And I might have really fucked her there if my parents had been home. But they weren't. So I asked her if she wanted to come to my house. She did. I lived close by, and walking over there, briskly, in silence, and we stepped forward with a tacit understanding, and moved briskly up the stairs to my room.

The second we got in there, we both, on instinct, perhaps, peeled off all our clothes. I'd bought condoms, in anticipation, and next thing I knew, I was mounting her and sticking my dick inside her young, redhaired pussy.

I remember my penis only getting halfway in, hitting a barrier. I didn't know a whole lot about sex. But I did know about a "cherry," a hymen, and knew that she was also a virgin, which surprised me, due to her reputation as the school slut. She wasn't as slutty as I thought, I guess... I was probably sluttier...

We fucked for five, ten minutes or so. You'd think that it being my first time, that I'd come quickly, but I didn't, and I even kept at it after coming, for a minute or two, my dick was so hard.

She was out of breath after we finished. She said something like "that was interesting" but little else and we lay without talking for a bit, watched the Pauly Shore show on MTV, and after a few minutes I went over by the window and smoked a cigarette.

I'd heard some girls bleed a lot when they lose their virginity, but she didn't bleed much, or at all, that I noticed.

I stubbed out my cigarette on the outer edge of the windowsill and went back to the bed, lay next to her. We watched TV for a while. The Red Hot Chili Peppers' music video "Give It Away" and a couple others. Faith No More's "Epic" was in heavy rotation then. It was the period in which metal was giving way to grunge and alternative.

While watching "Epic," she got horny, eying the lead singer, and we started making out again. I don't know why, but I popped my hard dick out from the front slit of my boxers, raised to my knees, hovered over her and shoved my dick straight into her mouth and began to facefuck her.

She had trouble sucking it. Teeth were involved. It was painful. For such a supposed slut, she was not living up to her reputation.

I had to angle her jaw and thrust a few more times before unloosing a massive load into her mouth.

After coming into her mouth, withdrawing, she struggled with my load, unsure what to do. She sort of gagged, her eyes bulged, and then she forced herself to swallow it and we lay for a while longer, cuddled.

I then smoked another cigarette, in bed, and we watched more MTV.

(Fuck, I miss when MTV played videos. How exciting it was to see a new band or rapper. I remember when my stepsister and I first saw Guns N' Roses' "Sweet Child of Mine" on her little TV, late at night. How special it was...)

Later Cindy had to go home, and when she left, she surprised a French kiss on me, and I could taste my cum on her tongue, in her mouth. It wasn't a pleasant taste, although I'm sure some enjoy it. Perhaps it's an acquired taste.

We didn't talk too much after that. I think it's because I got so fucked up on drugs that I wasn't able to maintain personal relationships beyond my immediate fellow druggies.

We did hang out one more time, a couple months later. She'd come by my house, uninvited, with her friend. Her friend was a very attractive blond, a fellow fuckup classmate of mine, a punk rock girl, who I'd smoke cigarettes and drink with at lunchtime, in middle school.

The blond had an older skinhead boyfriend. The blond was herself sort of racist, saying once to me how "Black people are annoying because they complain about slavery and that was, like, 400 years ago," which made me lose respect for her, but I didn't quite know how to respond. It was more disappointing than anything. I've never cared for racism.

The punk rock girl wasn't exactly the character you'd expect a half-Black girl to hang with, or one I usually associate myself with, but, as the great Dave Chappelle once riffed on, weed (and it could be said for cigarettes) makes for strange friends.

The blond, her skinhead boyfriend, and the half-Black butterface ginger came to my house over the summer, and the ginger was bragging about how she didn't shave her legs anymore, her red leg hair glinting in the sun.

I must have been quite high, because I still fucked her, while the blond and her skinhead boyfriend fucked in my stepsister's room next door. (My stepsister was in jail at the time for punching her teacher in the face.)

That was the last time I hung out with or even saw Cindy, the ginger. Last I heard of her was that she was out with some guy, and was on her period, so the guy fucked her in the ass, in a movie theater, and more people were watching that than the movie.

(I did, however, receive a Facebook friend recommendation for her not that long ago. In her profile picture, she was covered in tattoos, like every inch of her body, and had a Maori tat on her face, similar to Mike Tyson's... I didn't send a friend request. And she didn't send me one either...)

Back to my stepsister. She wasn't in jail the day I lost my virginity and was still living at home. In fact, she was home and was next door, in her room when it happened.

Later on that night, the night I'd lost my virginity, she came into my room to say hello. She'd seen Cindy leave the house earlier, saying a quick "hello" to her, the two introducing themselves, quickly, before Cindy left.

My stepsister was curious about Cindy, since she was the first girl I'd brought by the house. Sandy wanted to know what we'd been up to.

I told her the truth. We'd lost our virginities to one another.

She didn't believe me, so I showed her the used condom in the trash.

She was thrilled! More excited than me!

She grabbed her cordless phone, calling all her friends, proudly proclaiming that her little stepbrother had lost his virginity, to a Black girl! (She seemed especially pleased the girl was Black, or part-Black, at least.)

We watched TV together while she bragged about her little stepbrother's sexual prowess. Then she took off her shirt, pants, and lay in bed with me, in only a teddy. A sexy one. I could see her tits and pussy through it.

She'd never done that. Gotten half-naked in front of me. Lay next to me. We talked about sex. Doing it, different positions.

I scanned her supple body. She knew I was looking, lay there, smiled. It was like me having sex with that other girl, I'd passed a test.

There was maybe, just maybe, a brief window I could have jumped on top of her, had sex with her. Given her impulsivity (her being diagnosed as bipolar, at a young age), perhaps she'd have let me. Or, more likely, she'd had slapped me and beaten me again, if I tried. But I sort of wish I'd tried. It was the first time, of many, that I reflected and wished I'd made a move on a female.

While we never fucked, we did become good buddies. She helped me get weed and once helped me out of a tough spot when a group of Black guys at my school, who I'd been friends with before, wanted to beat me down. She'd gone to school with one of their older brothers and had a word with him, and all was cool again.

Before she was sent to that school for fuckups, then to jail, and ultimately kicked out of the house, banished to her mom's house, Sandy and me had become pretty tight. We'd smoke together, watch TV, hang. We got off to a rocky start, but later she and I were close, for a time.

Not only was she hot, but she was a pretty fucking cool chick, once you got to know her. She was kind, protective of her friends, and was a fun hang and had a wicked and dark sense of humor. We both liked standup comedy and would watch Dice Clay, Kinison, and Eddie Murphy on cable.

But we lost touch later, as she descended further down into madness.

She'd been in the army for a bit but got dishonorably discharged after going AWOL.

Then she got married to a plumber, had two kids with him, surprising everyone that she could have kids after the mountains of drugs she'd ingested, not to mention her multiple abortions.

Her husband divorced her later, though, after she attacked him with a broken bottle, attempting to stab and slash him, accosting him, claiming that their three-year-old daughter had been telling her the husband was cheating. Fortunately for him, he was able to run away from her, escape with only a small wound on his arm.

She spent another year in prison for that and lost full custody of the kids.

In prison, she got covered, head to toe, in tattoos, which didn't help her employment options after release (especially the face tattoo of a spider; that can't help in job interviews).

Then she had another baby with a far younger guy from her NA group, and lost custody of that child, too, after violating her probation for smoking meth and getting into a fistfight with another lady in the parking lot of a Trader Joe's, over a parking space, I think...

Most recently she's been living in a trailer on a beach somewhere in northern California and has become a born-again Christian and a vegan. She's not had steady phone numbers, email addresses, and isn't on social media, so it's been impossible to keep up with her. The only people she talks with are her dad and mom, who support her financially. Her brother tired of her exploits and cut ties with her years ago.

I tried keeping in touch with her for a number of years, but my calls, emails, and letters weren't returned.

14

My relationships with women have always been strained, unorthodox, complicated, which I guess isn't that uncommon. But whose relations with the opposite gender or love life, dating life is easy? Likely very few...

The first girl I can remember asking out, back when I was ten or eleven, was this girl I had a massive crush on for months. She was this cute, quiet brunette in my class, who I'd finally gotten the nerve to ask out.

As we rode the bus back to school, after a field trip to an early Florida pioneer settlement, several other kids were asking their crushes out, so I figured, what the hell, why not, and I walked over, confidently, strutting like a movie star, and I asked my dream girl out. But my dream girl wouldn't be mine, tragically, and, with a look of shock, she asked me if I was joking, her eyes squinting, her lip upturned in revulsion.

I told her it was a joke, to save face and to lessen the blunt force of the mental trauma, and I scurried off, dejectedly, so I could go lick my psychic wounds.

Oh yeah, that one hurt.

I'll never forget the look she gave me, and the pain of that rejection, how it spiked through me. It was like the pit of my stomach weighed 1000 tons and dropped like an anchor into a sea of shit. There really is nothing worse, no feeling worse for a man, than getting rejected by a girl he asks out, especially if it's one he's had a crush on for a while and finally works up the nerve to talk with and then...

But that's how it is. Feelings aren't always mutual.

And that's how it is, being the man, the one who has to make the move, usually. The man is often the one who has to put himself out there, and as I've gotten older, I've dealt with rejection easier, since I'm more acutely aware of the brevity, importance of time, and know not to dwell much on failures, waste time being upset. Plus, I know how many lovely ladies there are, all over the world, and if my feelings are unrequited, I let it sting for a night or two and just move on...

That first rejection was a body blow, and I've had others, but I've always been happier to have taken a chance and failed than not taken a chance at all. Those times I should have tried and didn't, those sting the worst...

However, it's not been all bad. In fact, far from it. I'm lucky to have met and spent time with many delightful women, who I cherish having met and whose companionship provided me many of the best times of my life.

Seriously, thinking about it, most of the best times I ever had involved women. The power of intimacy, physical contact, love, sex, and the magic and softness and the mere touch of a woman, there's nothing else like it. I can't imagine the sex

robots that'll come in the future will ever be able to recreate the true power of a woman...

Despite the challenges of being a man, hell, am I glad to be a man. As much as I love women, I wouldn't want to be one. Periods, pregnancy, how creepy and rapey dudes can be. I once heard an analogy that having a vagina and being somewhere dangerous is like carrying a briefcase filled with cash. You always have to worry about some piece of shit trying to take it from you... It's fucked up, but true...

One girl I dated in college told me how premature ejaculation, small dicks, any of that shit, she'd take in a second over being a woman. And I agree with her wholeheartedly- and don't ask me to riff more on that!

I have the utmost respect and admiration for women. Seriously. And I detest misogynists. Misanthropes I appreciate way more.

15

Back to middle school. That's where I really started to fuck up and spiral downwards.

The middle school I went to was a jungle.

They say kids can be cruel. And they're right. At this school, the kids were beyond cruel, they were merciless fucks.

This was back in the early 90s, before Columbine, before school shootings in America became a normal occurrence.

First hearing about the school shootings, as they unfolded, like a row of falling dominos, my reaction wasn't shock, it was one of understanding.

Not that I agreed or supported it, because I didn't. It was just that I could comprehend why these things happened after the myriad of bullying incidents I'd witnessed.

And I wasn't innocent. I'd participated, been on both sides.

But my middle school, that was bullying to an extreme.

The usual targets were the nerds and the usual perpetrators were the jocks, “cool” kids. One kid, named David, got it the worst of anyone.

An awkward, small, spastic and skinny kid, he was a perfect target, sticking out like a perfect victim with his bushy, messy hair and short shorts. He wouldn’t fight back most of the time either, he’d take it. Kicks in the rear, wedgies, pushed into the locker, every stereotypical middle school bully victim bullshit, tripe, he took it.

Once I participated in a circle of kids, encircling him, slapping, kicking him, one at a time. Poor bastard. He’d only really fight back if you hit him in the head, and then he’d be ready to go. His counterattacks were weak, though, and he’d be pummeled every time.

The poor bastard!

I remember later, after middle school, freshman year of high school, sitting next to him after we’d bumped into each other at a McDonald’s near the local high school.

Our high school wasn’t as brutal, and many cliques had gone their separate ways. There wasn’t nearly as much bullying there. But anyway, I sat next to David, and we chatted over burgers, cokes and fries. Talking with him, I suddenly realized what an asshole I’d been for fucking with him. He was a decent guy. A likable person. I felt like shit for teasing him, beating on him. I can’t remember if I apologized, but I should have. If somehow he ever reads this, I apologize now, seriously.

Maybe if kids sat down and talked more, got to know each other, as people, there’d be less incidents of harassment, bullying. People simply getting to know each other could solve a lot, I think...

He was one of many who got it bad but was probably the worst.

Another incident I recall starkly, one that sticks in my mind to this day, happened in my middle school cafeteria, at lunchtime. This cute mixed-race Asian girl, Tori, was circling lunch tables, cheerfully, smiling with her whole face, light glinting and bouncing off her braces as she was inviting people to a party. She was flanked by another super cute girl, and they were making lists of things to bring to the party.

From behind, from the throngs of teens in the cafeteria, from the patina of zits and braces and awkwardness, emerged a lioness, a Colombian girl, named Juliana.

Juliana was chunky, always in heavy makeup, and generally ghetto as fuck. She approached menacingly, surging forth, like a lion in the Serengeti.

The lioness's forehead was furrowed. There was venom in her eyes. Tori didn't even see her coming.

Juliana didn't say anything, just stopped in her tracks, cocked back her arm and slapped Tori upside the head, viciously, so hard I could hear the clap.

Then she walked away without uttering a word.

I have no idea what precipitated it. Maybe a rumor. Maybe a thing that upset Juliana. Tori was generally a sugar sweet girl. I can't imagine what she must have done. But whatever it was, it was serious enough to warrant the aforementioned corporal punishment.

Tori stood for a second in shock. She had no idea how to react. I think she'd come from an upper-middle class family. I don't think she'd ever been slapped. And as Juliana stomped off, Tori just stood there, frozen, the joy of her party-planning erased, washed from her face. She then broke into tears and was accompanied away in her girlfriend's caring arms.

What a shitty thing to do, that sort of sneak attack. Of course, I'd done it myself, to others, but seeing another person do it, especially it happening to someone I liked, especially during a moment of joy, seeing that made me realize how ugly it was and made me feel shitty about when I was younger, whapping those kids in the hallway... I wonder if they cried as much as Tori...

Afterwards, too, she didn't have the party...

Back to the lioness, it wouldn't be the first time there was trouble arising from the fiery Colombian.

Another incident almost ended extremely badly for me and my friend, Tony.

The Colombian's boyfriend was another chunky young soul, also ghetto as fuck, a fellow named John, who was a reputed crack dealer, and a fellow eighth grader at

our school. (This was the guy I wrote of earlier, the one from Saturday morning detention, who claimed to have gang-raped his teacher...)

My friend Tony, like me, was a bit of a dumbass and was a fellow skateboarder/poser/guitarist/smoker. We had recently gotten hold of fake acid, paper tabs that some older girls had sold to us, ripping us off, the fucking assholes...

(I'd done real acid before, so I knew, right after taking this shit, that it was fake, and was very disappointed...)

But Tony somehow thought it was real. Placebo effect, I guess. He thought he was tripping, but, really, he was just stupid and imagining things.

(Another time later, a group of fiends, including me, gave him another hit of fake acid, and he did the same thing, acted like he was tripping, waving his hands in front of his face, saying he was seeing trails, and we just smoked weed and laughed at his stupidity, didn't tell him it was fake, because it was too funny to stop. For weeks after that, he would claim he was having "flashbacks," dude. Until, finally, we came clean, told him it was a prank. But still, he wouldn't believe it...)

A lot less funny, however, was Tony taking the fake acid to school and offering to sell Juliana a tab. Not so smart to attempt to sell a violent crack dealer's girlfriend acid.

The crack dealer's friend, JD, who I'd been cool with, met me in the lunch line at the cafeteria, looped his arm around my neck, hugged me closely to his tall frame, his hard body, and walked me out of the cafeteria, forcibly.

At first, I'd greeted him warmly, since we'd been friendly, but I could see something was amiss. I'd asked him if everything was alright, and he didn't respond. His face was cold, stone cold, and angry as a hornet. A chill went down my spine. I had no idea what was going on or why he was so pissed, and he wouldn't answer me as I tried to talk to him.

He pulled me into a bathroom and from every corner, and from out of the stalls, big Black dudes emerged. They all looked furious. I was friendly with them before, never had a single issue with any of them, nor wanted any issues, but they circled

me, and probably would have beaten the honky ass shit out of me, if it wasn't for a friend of mine who saw the pissed off JD pull me into the bathroom, and alerted the vice principal, who, at first, didn't think it was a big deal and didn't do anything, until my friend prodded him, told him it looked serious.

(Thank GOD for that friend. A true friend is one who saves you from being violently beaten by gangbangers and crack dealers...)

The vice principal stepped into the bathroom, thankfully, before any hands were thrown, and saved me from possibly being permanently handicapped.

As the group was dispersing, the crack dealer, John, who, again, I'd been friendly with, walked by me and called me a "bitch."

I was confused. I genuinely had no idea what I could have done to warrant such extreme uncivility and possible hospitalization.

I met up with Tony, and he told me he'd jokingly offered acid to Juliana, and that John, the crack dealer, before nearly thrashing me, had pinned him to a locker in the hallway, that morning, and pulled a gun, put it to Tony's head, and threatened to kill him (and me!) after school.

It was guilt by association. It was no secret that we smoked cigarettes, weed, drank, did whatever drugs we could find. So those guys must have thought we were selling, too, moving in on their turf. Or, probably, it was merely to do with Tony being dumb enough to offer Juliana acid. Fake acid, at that.

Of course, inside, I was raging, knowing what trouble Tony got me into. These weren't the people you wanted problems with. I might have been wanting to punch him in the nose but given that both our lives were in danger, literally, there was no use in that. We had to stick together.

We'd seen what the crack dealer and his posse could do.

(Yes, I said posse. I had a posse too. Here's to you, LeBron James!)

There was a Latin kid named Aaron, who transferred to our school. He looked pretty tough. I think he was from a rival gang, and he'd ran afoul of John and crew, and I saw the Latin kid get jumped, swarmed on, the shit beaten out of him,

the kid punched in the face, kicked while on the ground by John and two of his friends after school, at the bus stop.

The next day Aaron brought a handgun to school, pulled it on them in the hallway. Our Spanish teacher was nearby and talked him down, talked him into giving up the gun, ending the standoff. It turned out it was just a BB gun, though. The kid was still arrested, put in a cop car (I saw him led out in handcuffs as I stole a smoke in the woods behind school), and he was later suspended and expelled from our school.

Tony and I had seen Aaron's beatdown and had heard other tales of John and his posse's brutality. And we didn't have any BB guns or real guns, at the time, unfortunately.

Being vulnerable to being "jumped," getting a gang beating, Tony and I took off and ran away after lunch, literally running, like prisoners escaping jail, and tearing through the woods next to the school, knowing John and posse would be waiting for us after school to beat us or shoot us or whatever.

And a friend confirmed, later, that they were in fact waiting for us, after school, stalking the bus stop, five of them, asking around, trying to hunt us down so they could whoop our asses.

Somehow, in all this, Tony and I were suspended from school for skipping class. Which was ironic. Nothing happened to John or his friends. Tony and I were also given additional administrative punishments, ordered to undergo psychological testing, and often sequestered, separated from classmates, made to sit alone in empty rooms, away from the other kids.

I guess we could have told the school what had happened, that John and his posse wanted to beat us down, but we weren't into snitching. Not like the school didn't know, I imagine, after the vice principal saw what nearly happened in that bathroom and how rumors, drama in that school spread like forest fires...

Fortunately, I had a friend, a girl, who was friends with John and vouched for me, let him know I had nothing to do with it.

(Another GREAT friend to whom I must be eternally thankful!)

One of John's friends, also a violent crack dealer, still hated me, though, and, a couple weeks later, punched me in the neck, hard, in the hallway. He was slightly skinny and not much bigger than me and while I'm sure he could have probably fucked me up, I was willing to fight him. However, I backed down, knowing that if I had fought back, he and his posse would have given me a gang-beating later. I'd seen it happen to others... I bet something of the sort had happened with Aaron...

Then a week or so later, the same skinny prick cornered me in the locker room, grabbed a fistful of my hair, and raised his arm, as if to punch me.

An African kid standing nearby, broke it up. Held John's friend back and shook his head and said "no."

John's friend backed off. The African kid, a super nice and friendly fellow, as are most Africans, was also, like many Africans, tough and rugged.

By this time, I'd had enough. I stood up to John's friend. Although he was bigger and rougher than me, I didn't care. I didn't care anymore if his friends would fuck me up. I was ready to go out swinging. After everything I'd been through in my short life, I wasn't ready to be a victim, and I stalked after him and simply asked what I ever did to him, why he had a problem with me.

I figured we'd duke it out, throw hands, settle it. I'd get a thrashing, but I had to fight back. End the cycle of abuse. Prove my worth. In that way, our school was like a prison. Those who showed weakness got it the worst. But those who fought back or were tough were left alone.

(Not long before that, there was a time I backed down, when a rat-tailed kid picked a fight with me, shoved me a couple times in the locker room, challenged me to a fight, said he'd "beat my ass." He was a tough character, this kid, a swaggering ruffian, who was always starting fights. Word had it his sister, who was in the Army, would kick the shit out of him with her steel-toe boots. That was her thing, just fucking kicking him. And his dad would beat him, too.)

((I wasn't looking for any fight with this kid, especially since I'd stopped the martial arts and my stepbrother had moved out by then, so I wasn't in fighting shape. If he'd swung at me, I'd have defended myself, but I calmly walked away from that one, turned down his invitation to fight, and he just looked at me

curiously, then walked away, didn't bother me again... Ironically, walking away from unnecessary fights is a virtue many dojos preach, and rightfully so...))

((Years later, I came to discover, reading the local paper online, during a trip through Europe, that the rat-tail kid's dad, who'd been a janitor at another school, was arrested for producing, distributing child pornography... And after seeing that story online, I felt even better about not fighting the kid...)))

Back to John's friend, amazingly, the kid backed off, walked away from me, cowered, and said how his older brother, this massively bigger high school linebacker was going to beat the shit out of me.

Pretty pathetic, the whole thing. I guess he was too much of a wimp to fight anyone who stood up to him.

I didn't know the kid's linebacker brother, personally, but I'd heard of him, and when he said his name, I knew someone who did know him. He, Rick, "Slick Rick," was friends with my stepsister and one of her ex-boyfriends.

Not wanting Slick Rick to come kill me, I told my stepsister about it, and she wasn't having any of it. She had a word with Slick Rick and cleared everything up.

(My stepsister's crack dealer boyfriend at the time was scarier than Slick Rick or John, probably supplied John or knew who did. Thinking back on it, my stepsister was probably scarier than Slick Rick, too, and thank GOD for her, my stepsister, saving my ass. I'm blessed to have had such friends and family on my side then...)

And shortly after this time, I had a falling out with Tony. He'd pissed me off royally by nearly getting me killed by those assholes. And the more weed we smoked and drugs we did, the stupider he got.

One night, my other friends and I (including Tori, the half-Asian girl who'd been smacked in the lunchroom) were at a house-party and were high and drunk as fuck. Tony was there, being an idiot, as usual. I remember one of my friends, this spastic Mexican kid, who was a lovable psycho, was screaming, in a fake British accent, "SLAY THE BEAST!!!" and lashing Tony with a flyswatter.

Finally, it reached a crescendo. We'd had enough of Tony's shit and we swarmed on him, pummeled him, half-playfully, half-seriously, with kicks and slaps, my friend still yelling "SLAY THE BEAST!" in this funny British accent, the whole time,

and the beating ended when I picked up a shoe, meaning to hit him on the arm with it, but I accidentally whapped him square on the nose, drawing a nasty stream of blood.

I can still remember my friend, whose house we were at, castigating Tony not to bleed on the floor because he didn't want to catch AIDS.

Tony, his hands clasped over his bloody face, ran to the bathroom. He locked himself in there, but let in this skinny girl, Tori's friend, and they made out some. After she left, he left too, not wanting further abuse, but instead of sleeping with her somewhere (this was eighth grade and all) he wound up sleeping that night on a park bench.

Following that incident, we were no longer friends, and John and his crew and I became friendly again. I smoked weed together with a couple of them, at a house-party. Not John, though. I'd never have smoked weed with that fucking rapist.

(Not long after my friendship with Tony ceased, a pissed off movie usher, a bigger, older kid, a junior in high school, a football player, with tons of acne and a greasy beard smeared across his cheeks, cornered me in the movie theater bathroom. The football player was saying he heard Tony called his sister a "bitch." The dude was raging, face blood red. I sighed, thinking, fuck, here we go again, another jerkoff wanting to kick my ass over Tony's stupid mouth. I shook my head, exasperated, told him I wasn't friends with Tony anymore, and that I didn't care for him either. Then the usher, in his usher uniform, bow tie and all, mind you, yells at me, "Well, if you see him, tell him I'm gonna CAP his ass!")

((I don't think he did cap his ass, and if he did, he only capped him in the ass, like Suge Knight, and it wasn't a fatal wound, because Tony was still alive for at least a few years following that. And I'm guessing his ass was intact.))

((((I heard the usher had claimed to his friends that he'd pinned me up against a wall as he told me this, which was untrue. He never laid a finger on me, fortunately.)))

Tony, after getting smacked in the face with the shoe, became friends with this kid named Elliot, who'd been banished from his crew of jocks.

Elliot, at a sleepover, had wet his bed, at a jock's house, and that wasn't a thing he'd ever live down. He had to transfer schools later, the teasing over the bedwetting was so severe. His reputation could never be salvaged...

That same crew of jocks were total assholes. Far worse assholes than me or any of my friends. Later, five on one, they attacked Tony, at a party, not playfully either, not an accidental face slap with a shoe (not to minimize my infraction, I'm still an asshole for it) but these guys jumped and beat the ever-living shit out of Tony, beat him so badly that he had to be hospitalized.

Tony's mom called the cops on them and had them arrested and their families were forced to pay Tony's medical bills. One of them did a short bid in juvenile hall, for beating Tony, and he allegedly raped another boy there, at knifepoint.

(Last I ever heard of Tony was that he'd stolen a person's identity, was claiming to actually be that person. This is before the digital age, online identity theft. He'd just been using the person's name, story, background.)

It didn't surprise me those jocks were cowards and shitheads and ganged up and mauled Tony, who I'm sure had said or done some dumb shit, but certainly didn't deserve that...

I'd been friends with those jocks, too, for a little while in seventh grade. We'd played in a short-lived, shitty garage band together.

We never were that tight, but I liked them, and thought we were friends. Until one night one of them called me, the drummer, and started asking questions about the guitarist.

I wasn't sure what to make of it. But then the guitarist came on the phone (unbeknownst to me, he'd been on silently, on three-way calling) and he told me he thought I was a loser and a faggot and that I should stay the fuck out of his face. Then he hung up.

That was the end of that band, friendship, and we never spoke again.

It was the first time I'd had someone, a friend, or someone I thought to be a friend, do such a weaselly, backstabbing type of thing to me.

I was in shock about it, honestly. That ugly, sinking stomach type feeling ran through me, like when my fifth-grade crush rejected me. It was brutal.

I remember my stepsister coming home from her lockup school for fuckups and stopping by my room to say hello and being perplexed, asking what was wrong, but I didn't want to say, kept my lips sealed. I never talked to anyone about it.

The next day I had a Spanish class with those kids, and fuck if that wasn't the most uncomfortable class.

I could have played sick. I could have transferred out of the class. But I dressed up in a nice sweater, pants, and faced it. They didn't say shit to me, or me to them, except for one of their friends, this short little Black kid, Mike, whose dad was a pastor, and who whispered to me a few times, "What's with the sweater?" to which I didn't reply.

In recollection, same as with John's crew, I think of them now as wimps. They had to pull something like that over the phone. Gang up on me, others. They were the losers. But, hell, we were all just kids, and I don't hold much contempt or lasting hatred or any feelings towards them, aside from the rapists. That shit is unforgivable. I'd want to spit in those slimy rapists' faces, if I saw them, even today...

That same crew, the last contact I had with them, though, I'll never forget. One of them, the drummer from our shitty band, had beef with a kid in our crew.

The drummer had challenged our friend, Lenny, to a fistfight. I have no idea what precipitated it, but the challenge was made, and the fight was set.

They were set to meet, on a Friday night, outside the movie theater nearby our neighborhood. Before their showdown, in anticipation, my crew and I had smoked a shit-ton of skunk weed at the old abandoned building we'd hang at and got high as the heavens. I remember us then marching up to the movie theater, as a platoon, and one of us singing "Don't Worry, Be Happy" and slapping on his chest. It was our best attempt at drums of war.

Reaching the movie theater, the jocks lay in wait. The contrast between our groups was stark. They all had crewcuts. We had long hair. They all wore athletic

gear, Duke shirts and FUBU brand clothes, Nike shoes. We wore weed leaf T-shirts, tie-dye shirts, and baggy jeans and ripped shorts and flip flops.

The guitarist, the one who'd told me on the phone to stay the fuck out of his face, stood at the front of the pack. With a wan smile, he scoffed at us and called us a bunch of pussies. To which I replied, sternly, that this was an issue between an isolated two and there wouldn't be any other problems.

I expected to have a fight with him, after saying what I did, especially with the tone of voice I employed, but, like John's friend, he, too, was a coward. He didn't even reply, turned his cheek, and walked away. It was the last time we ever spoke to one another.

Lenny and the drummer squared off. Stood face to face like boxers before the bell rings.

The drummer was tall, but was a skinny fuck, not exactly imposing. He had a ruddy, freckly face and a bulky, shiny set of braces, a real metal mouth, and I was thinking he probably shouldn't be fighting anyone, with those braces in his mouth. One punch to the kisser and his face would've been an ugly, bloody car wreck.

Lenny, on the other hand, was no skinny braceface fuck. He was taller, too, than the drummer, and far bigger. He was stout, that Germanic, northern European type of big, a cross between chubby and muscular.

If I were a gambler, I'd certainly place my bets on Lenny. Lenny, with his tensile strength, could have probably picked up and snapped the drummer's bitch-ass, cracked him in two, over his hulking knee, like a twig snapping over a tree trunk.

But Lenny, in the face of the drummer's aggression, completely shut down. Perhaps it was the weed. Weed doesn't exactly make people violent. I bet if we were drinking or on meth or PCP it'd been a different story. (The drummer should be thankful we weren't, or he'd have wound up maimed or dead, for real...)

We weren't on such testosterone summoning, rage enhancing substances, though. We were stoned, fucking blitzed on the kind buds. And Lenny wanted no fight, as the drummer shoved him, peacocking and posturing, in front of everyone, playing Mr. Tough Guy.

Lenny stood stoically, ten toes on the ground. Though he stood firm, his voice was choking, as he pled for peace, almost begging, saying again and again that he didn't want to fight.

But the drummer wouldn't back off. Finally, the drummer, tired of being spurned in his invitation to brawl, curled his metal mouth into a sneer and said that he'd let Lenny go only if Lenny kissed his shoe.

Incredibly, Lenny dropped to his knees, like he was about to pray, and then got on all fours, like an animal, and kissed the drummer's shoe.

The drummer was disgusted, groaned, swatted his hand at Lenny like he was shooing away a fly and he and his crew, who were in a mixed state of laughter and disbelief, walked off, hooting and jeering.

None of my crew knew how to react. We didn't say anything about it to Lenny. Lenny rose to his feet, his face pale and red but otherwise expressionless. I had a sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach. It was the first time I can remember feeling embarrassed and dejected for someone else.

We walked off, wordlessly, went over to my friend Taylor's house, where we usually smoked, and we hit the bong, mostly in silence, listening to Cypress Hill and classic rock. We didn't speak much at all the rest of the night. I remember Lenny just sitting there in the corner, the pale elephant in the room, and not long after he went back home, I guess. I'm not sure. I remember, after he split, one of us asking another why it was he chickened out and the other replying that Lenny was like Gandhi. This was before I even really knew who that was.

The rest of the evening, even though we had the funk, the stink buds, I couldn't get high, though, after that. It had been such a buzzkill. Seeing a friend act like such a coward. I went home early that night and read "Cujo" in an attempt to take my mind off it.

I don't know why Lenny cowered like that. Not that he was really like Gandhi, a pacifist or anything. The next week, in the locker room after gym class, a skinny little rat-faced kid with these pointy ears started teasing Lenny about it, and Lenny began strangling the kid, pinned him up to a locker. If I hadn't intervened, stopped it, it might have been a murder.

Lenny, like the bedwetter, transferred schools shortly thereafter. We never hung out with him again, either, after that night. I have no idea who he became or where he is now. Hopefully, for his sake, he doesn't dwell on it.

I did hear of the guitarist and drummer, though, through a high school alumni newsletter. Both became bigshot stockbrokers, opened financial services firms, got married, had kids, built McMansions, were living the American Dream. Who says nice guys finish last?

16

There are three other incidents from those middle school days that haunt me.

The first I'll discuss was in an arcade. A creepy looking guy, about twenty-something, with bulging brown bug-eyes and a Nightstalker look to him, appeared from nowhere, as if a specter, a shadow, and he was standing closely behind me as I played a video game.

A small crowd of people were mobbed around the video game machine, and I distinctly remember something brushed up against my ass, maybe a hand or dick and I turned around to see the creepy fuck standing even more uncomfortably close to me.

At the time, too, I was carrying a hunting knife. A large one, with a serrated blade. There'd been much violence in those days, so I wanted to be prepared for anything. This was obviously a situation where the knife would have been handy.

However, to this day, it's fuzzy. I do believe he touched me. But I'm not 100% sure. He was far too old to be hanging out in a kids' arcade. It's likely he was doing something insidious. My friend Taylor was next to me, and I wonder if he had been touched or noticed anything. We never spoke of it.

What would have happened if I withdrew the knife, stabbed the creeper in the stomach? Would I have been blamed? Put in juvenile hall? If he did touch me, would I not have been punished? Did he have a prior record? Did he attack someone later? Is he rotting in jail now? Would stabbing him have prevented a future incident?

These are questions that dance like zombies in my head. They're like zombies because they're dead and can't be answered. They're like zombies because, in a way, they'll be alive until my brain dies.

In the next two incidents, I was on the offensive.

The first was with this kid, Manny, a child magician, who was tanned bronze as the metal and had short, slicked back blond hair like a Wall Street stockbroker. He'd moved in from Fort Lauderdale, by way of NYC, I think.

For some reason, I fucking hated him, and enjoyed picking on him. It was probably me filled with the negative energy from my stepbrother beating on me and channeling that onto him.

After school, Taylor and I followed the magician home. I wanted to fight him. I was punching him, lightly, in the face, shoving him, and he was crying, in streaming hot tears, begging me to stop.

An old Jamaican gardener nearby, who'd been tending to a lawn, broke up our quarrel.

I'll never forget the gardener, in his heavy Jamaican accent, asking me why I wanted to fight.

The gardener, pointing at the crying, whimpering magician, said, in all sincerity, "Look at him. He is crying woman!"

Taylor and I then looked at each other. And instantly burst into laughter. It was easily one of the funniest things we'd ever heard. It wasn't just what the gardener said, but how he said it, with his serious, contorted face and his accent that had made it so uproariously hilarious.

To the magician, though, it had to compound his suffering to an unimaginable degree.

Taylor and I left, faces red as tomatoes, hyperventilating in laughter at the poor magician, who remained in utter dismay, tears running down his cheeks, snot pouring from his nose.

Later, I saw the same kid, the magician, at a karate class that my parents begrudgingly allowed me to join, but only for a few lessons.

I'm sure I was the reason he'd taken up karate, and how fucked is that, to see your tormentor there at the karate class you're taking to learn to defend yourself...

But after the "crying woman" quip, I couldn't bring myself to fuck with him anymore. Even then, I knew better.

I ran into him, later in life, five or six years after high school, in a strip mall parking lot.

We shared a smoke, talked, and, like with David, I realized he was a chill guy and I felt like an asshole for fucking with him. I even apologized to him.

Last I heard of him, he'd been a successful CEO for a time, but got into trouble, financial and legal hot water, for shady business practices...

The last incident from middle school that resonates, haunts me, is one that a friend, an accomplice, said he'll never tell anyone of and will take to his grave.

I, however, in keeping with the theme of exorcising demons, will share it. And I warn the reader, it is graphic, and it is not a tale I am proud of. But it is a demon. My demon. A true demon that must be exorcised...

Taylor's older brother's friend, Cam, who I later befriended and became tight with, was the first of us to have a car, this little old puke green VW Beetle.

The way he'd rag on this jaunt, too! Grinding the gears, spinning the wheels! He drove that fucker like Formula One!

Being mischievous bastards, we decided to pull a nasty prank. It wasn't my idea, though since I participated, I admit to sharing responsibility for the blame... I believe it was Cam's friend's idea, this weird German guy, Dieter (whose mother was a victim of a random nighttime rape, pulled under a car in a parking lot, raped at knifepoint, and then a few months afterwards the lady jumped off a building).

Dieter hatched a plan to fill huge super-soaker water-guns, cannons, essentially, with bleach, in a couple, and piss, in a couple.

Riding in Cam's car, we rode around in rich areas, around West Palm Beach, and pulled brazen drive-by shootings. First blasting the bleach at ladies wearing expensive clothes, especially fur, if we saw it. And we did. None of the women

seemed cognizant, when we shot the bleach at them, but I'm sure they noticed later.

The piss we were to shoot into people's faces. And we did that too. Zapping a few random people, mostly those standing at intersections. Spraying the victims right in the face with our urine, the piss canisters we'd all contributed to.

I remember one I shot, distinctly making eye contact with him before I opened fire. He was a middle-aged, probably fortyish, Black man in a blue-collar style work uniform. I aimed the water pistol and shoot him directly in his face, angling into his mouth, with a steady yellow stream of lukewarm piss.

The man stopped in his tracks, squinted, scrunched his face as the piss seeped into his oral, nasal orifices, and he smacked his lips, made a tasting type of sound, and his expression turned to one of rage as he realized it was urine streaming into his mouth.

He yelled, "FUCK YOU!" and threw a brown paper bag of McDonald's food at our car, and chased after the old VW Beetle, which, fortunately for us, didn't break down. And in the car, as we sped off, the car's tiny engine squealing, we cackled like villains, and watched the enraged man's hurtling figure vanish into the patina of night.

I wonder what he did afterwards. Did he vomit? Did he beat the shit out of the next White person he saw? Did he go home and beat his wife? Or did he do nothing and walk it off, stoically...

A hard-working, blue-collar man, walking home, ready to eat his McDonald's food, watch TV, go to bed after a long day, and he gets that.

The world can be a cruel, cold place.

And yes, I am sorry for this demon. I am sorry for this iniquity. I'm ashamed that I've done this. And I'm sure, as adults, every guilty party in that car would not just apologize but repent in contrition...

The rest of my middle school was spent in a haze of weed, cigarettes, LSD, liquor, and shrooms. Mostly by the end of it, we'd chilled out, as far as pranks and violence. Our routine generally consisted of us gathering at Taylor's house to smoke up, play video games, listen to tunes, and pass out on the floor.

(Taylor's parents were old hippies that'd become businesspeople and were usually away on business trips. They didn't care that we smoked weed, did whatever drugs. As long as we did it at their house. And not on the street. I guess they figured it was better us doing it there, where we could avoid arrest, other indignity.)

((It was cool of them, for sure, to allow the house, the basement, to be party central. But fuck, if that wasn't the dirtiest house. No one would ever clean it. There'd be half-eaten food in the kitchen, dirty pots and pans, plates everywhere. The bathroom was straight funky, covered in soap scum, mold, and stray hairs. We'd crash there, party there, but no one ever wanted to shower there... Amazingly, though, I don't recall any insect infestation there, in that house... Maybe it was even too dirty for the cockroaches...))

Our crew had become quite chill, for a while. Playing video games, hacky sack, and passing out high, drunk, fucked on whatever had become the mission of each and every night.

I remember our friend Armando, always passing out in this big brown comfy La-Z-Boy recliner. Dude'd melt into that chair. Become one with it. Dude had skin like crude oil and a shaved head and when he'd fall asleep with his tongue out he'd look like a high, incapacitated, Cuban Michael Jordan.

By then we'd become a crew of aspiring Cheech and Chongs...

It wasn't until high school that things took a darker turn.

High school got off to a bad start when I was shipped to another school, separated from my friends.

I'd been banished because throughout most of middle school, I was a true truant and preferred not being in school, trapped in a classroom, seeing the golden sunshine from barred windows. I preferred not being around bullies and didn't like being told what to do and what to learn. What I preferred was ditching class

to read Stephen King books in the library, taking walks in the sun, smoking whatever I could find, or going to the local guitar shop, jamming with whomever was around.

So, yeah, it was because of my habitually skipping school that I'd been assigned to a "Level 4" program for at-risk youth. The program was located at another local high school, one slightly farther from my home, not the school I'd have normally attended.

The program had half its classes in the high school's mainstream classrooms and the other half in a "special" classroom, a containment unit with a teacher's aide and special needs teachers, plus a program coordinator, who was like our principal and in charge of disciplining us.

Beside our special containment classroom sat our program coordinator's narrow little oblong office, where he, Mr. Maroni, a dude who bore a striking resemblance to TV's original MacGyver, sat hunched over his overflowing desk, doing paperwork, watching us like a hawk through the translucent rectangular window cut between his office and our classroom. The window was about the size of a coffin. Once a week he'd summon us into his office for progress and performance evaluations.

It was sort of good practice for the corporate world, I guess.

The other kids in the school knew we were fuckups and usually kept their distance. Most were scared of us and our ilk. And with good reason.

One time on the way to class I overheard a couple of the school's mainstream students discussing our program. Both were in standard preppy attire, collared shirts and blue jeans, white baseball caps. They both appeared as if they'd later be Duke students.

"Hey, what's that?" one asked the other, pointing at our classroom, his blue eyes narrowing.

The other tilted his head and giggled, then said, "Oh that, that's a special program for students who, like, kill their teachers and shit."

But that was far from the worst indignation. The worst was being forced to ride the short bus with the mentally retarded kids.

Not that I had anything against them. It wasn't the best optics, though, making us ride in the short bus with them. And I did hate the bus driver.

The bus driver and her assistant, both fifty to sixtyish Black ladies doted on the retarded kids but completely reviled us, we the other, less helpless, but still special needs kids.

If the retarded kids weren't at that bus stop, the bus would wait five minutes, and the driver'd go up to their door, knock and ask about them. But if one of us wasn't there, right when the bus showed up, they'd peel off. Once or twice I saw the bus from down the street, and I chased after it to no avail. I suspected they'd seen me in the rearview, too, and sped up.

Another guy, Stan, in my program had the same problem; he hated that fucking short bus. We were friendly and it so transpired that he lived nearby me. He was a few years older than me, and when he got a car, he'd give me rides to school.

He was a big burly meathead dude and used to be a star running back for the high school in our immediate neighborhood, where we should have gone, if we hadn't been fuckups.

A virtual high school football legend, folks all around Miami would talk about his exploits on the field, him breaking records, running for 300 something yards per game.

Recruited by several D-1 college programs, he shocked everyone and quit the game. Never told a soul why. Just stopped playing. Stopped going to school. His grades plummeted, and he got sent to the same "at-risk" program as me.

Half-Japanese, half-Latin, very few knew he was half-Japanese, and when the kids in our class would taunt, fuck with this Chinese kid in our class, for being Asian, Stan'd simply up and leave the classroom. My teacher told me later why, that he was part Asian, which I'd previously had no idea.

(Not that it mattered anyway, and I never participated in the racial abuse of the Chinese kid. It'd grossed me out, honestly. And I regret not speaking up about it. Racism wasn't a thing I ever appreciated, in any form. I find that most people are equally shitty in various aspects. No one's passing a purity test...)

Our homeroom teacher was the person who told me about Stan's football history, which I'd also not known. The teacher had been a former high school and college football player himself and had treated Stan with a certain reverence.

(Lucky for those kids that Stan was a nice guy. He was big enough to whip any one of them for being such racist pricks. And he'd have had every right to do so...)

Stan and I got along well, I think, because, unlike everyone else, who'd try to get him to play football again or talk football, I didn't care about football. And I never joined in with the other kids fucking with the Chinese guy.

Stan and I liked a few of the same video games, TV shows, and we both smoked weed, got high a few times in his car, on the drive together before school. He was a kind, gentle giant, Stan. But soon enough he got irregular with the rides, not showing up, several times, ditching school. Since I'd missed the bus, I had to pay, from my own pocket, for a cab, since no public transportation went to our school.

Finally, I had to go back to the short bus.

Last time I saw Stan, he offered me a ride to school the next day and was disappointed when I politely declined.

I didn't see him much anymore after that. He attended school only sporadically, and I think he dropped out or was forced to leave. He's disappeared into the fog of my adolescence, too, and I never saw or heard of him around the neighborhood, either. I bet he probably had CTE or a condition to that effect. Probably had it far worse than me. I hope he wound up better than Junior Seau...

There were a few other memorable kids from that program. One, a big Black dude, named "T," once pulled me aside, asked me if I was selling weed. I told him no. Which was true. I was only smoking it. My stepsister's crack dealer boyfriend supplying me with killer Jamaican.

I smiled and asked him if he was selling. He smiled back. I knew the answer. It was his turf, and I respected that, at that time I wasn't selling at all.

He turned out to be a chill dude, and we smoked weed, cigarettes a couple times together at lunch in the woods near school.

The only time I ever saw him get ugly was when a skinhead, this weird fuck, named Bobby, threw a pencil at him, and the pencil hit T's head.

I was sitting in the desk behind Bobby, and T stalked over, pissed as fuck. For a second, I worried he might do something to me, but fortunately our teacher yelled at Bobby for throwing the pencil, so T knew exactly where to assign blame.

T walked right up to Bobby and punched him in the face. Landed around the side of the forehead. Hard. So hard it echoed, made this cracking sound like wood being chopped.

Bobby was himself a large fellow, but T struck him with such force that Bobby crumpled into the desk, and, amazingly, no blood was drawn, but Bobby was woozy and had to be helped to the nurse's office.

Looking back at it, though, Bobby deserved it in more ways than one. It came out later he'd raped a ten-year-old girl in the bed of a pickup truck, and he went to jail for it. Fuck that guy.

A memorable girl from the program was named Lily. And man, she was hot! She had a killer, round, tight little ass. One of the tightest, shapeliest asses I've ever seen, and she had a doll-like, super cute face, and fluffy, long blond hair and these big bulbous strikingly crystal blue eyes. Her eyes were like saucers...

She'd been a party girl, often drinking. She came from a rich family. When she began getting into trouble, grades slipping, she was put into our program.

I never partied with her or knew her personally but had friends who did. She ran in the same circles, though we never crossed paths, aside from being together in class, for a brief time.

It was only a brief time, though, that we were classmates. And it was for the best that I wasn't too close with her, because she, at age 16, driving her BMW convertible, driving drunk, doing about 100 mph, wrapped the car around a tree. She and her friend in the front seat were killed instantly. One of them was ripped in half.

The accident happened not far from our high school. Whenever I'd pass by or drive by the tree she hit, it'd have flowers, wreaths laid by it. For a while there was a ribbon tied around the tree.

She was the first person my age, who I knew, who died. It was eerie, fucking petrified me, because as a teen I thought I was invincible. I guess that's youth, though. You think nothing can break and that everything will last forever. It's often when you're older and sore in the morning and more and more people you know and love die, that's when you discover otherwise... But I really had a taste of death and life's fragility then, and it was sobering...

It altered my whole perspective. It was a thing that I couldn't see happening in real life. Maybe in movies or TV, but not in my life, not in my school, not to my classmate. But it did. It did happen... Reflecting on it, it probably should have pushed me away from my dark path. But it didn't...

A friend of hers, Dan, I became close with. He was a chubby Jew with handsome, dark Sephardic features and a puffy shock of curly black hair that stood straight up in the air, like he'd stuck his finger in an electric socket. He was also in the program at our school, for fuckups, and he was also from a rich family. His dad had started a chain of supermarkets, and he lived in a mansion near the school.

His house was huge, built in a French chateau style, with a chalky white exterior, red stucco roof, and an Olympic size swimming pool in the back. It was the second mansion I'd been in, the first being a friend of a friend whose house I'd visited a couple times, that mansion being even more palatial.

But this one was not too shabby, either.

Dan's parents had divorced, and his mother was rarely home. When she was, she didn't care too much what we did, so we smoked weed, partied all the time at his place.

(He had a strange relationship with his mother, too. Always commenting on her body, scoping her ass, talking about it, especially when she wore swimsuits at the pool. I never knew how to respond to it.)

Dan and I shared many of the same musical tastes, mainly classic rock, and we started a band. By this time, I'd gotten heavier into playing guitar and was halfway decent at it.

Our band, consisting of a drummer, Bert, another guitarist, Alan, and this spastic kid, Earl, who was like our mascot and would make funny sounds with various parts of his body and do wild dances.

We were actually okay. We played mostly covers of Skynyrd, Pink Floyd, and a few originals.

We'd played a couple house parties, had neighborhood girl groupies. It was fun, exciting, playing parties at his mansion and a couple other rich kids' houses.

Finally, we hooked up with another band, from another high school, who also had a small following, cassette tape demos of their shows, bootleg band practices being traded around town, like us, at that point.

Together we booked a large coffeehouse for a concert, co-headlining, and we promoted it with fliers plastered all over our respective schools.

I wasn't expecting there to be many people there, outside of our immediate group of friends, a gaggle or two of their friends.

But when we arrived at the coffeehouse, high and drunk as fuck, there were people lined up around the block, far as I could see.

I was amazed there were so many folks there. There were cool kids from school. Hot girls. People I'd seen but never met.

The show went off without a hitch, and we did a cover of "Sweet Home Alabama" that brought the house down.

I'm sure that if I saw it now, or still possessed a recording, I'd be like, what the fuck, and I'm sure Skynyrd would want to sue us for irreparably harming their masterpiece, and I wouldn't blame them, but at that time, for us, in our heads, in our world, it was magnificent.

For that night, at least, I was a fucking rock star.

Sadly, the band came to a disappointing end. A week or two after the show, I'd broken my arm playing a stoned game of backyard basketball, diving for a loose ball, and we had to cancel a string of shows. Then, we had a falling out, partially over the spastic kid owing my friend money, a drug debt, he'd refused to pay, and

we'd generally lost touch, stopped hanging out as much when I transferred to another school.

There was an angry phone call, where we cursed each other out, Dan's older, big, and I mean big, and rotund, brother threatening to shoot me, "go to war" with me and my drug dealer friend, and fortunately, for their sake, the dispute didn't involve my stepsister's crack dealer boyfriend. It was a kinder, gentler drug dealer I'd felt the need to stick up for.

After our falling out, I went by Dan's house to pick up my amp, my gear, and one of them, Alan, the guitarist, came out, and tried to argue with me, put me down. Dan didn't say shit. Just handed me my gear. I didn't argue with Alan. Because the spaz had repaid the debt and apologized, so it was over, as far as I was concerned, and I didn't care about it anymore.

When leaving Dan's mansion, with my friend, in his car, Dan, Alan, and Dan's brother stood in front of the house, giving me the evil eye, smoking cigarettes. We never spoke or saw each other again.

I'd heard that Dan, a few months afterwards, got disowned by his father. He'd been using his dad's ATM card, withdrawing tons of cash to spend on drugs, and he'd even written a song about his thievery, a sappy ballad called: "It's on Ivan" (his dad's name).

His dad, upon finding out, cut him off entirely, at least at that time; I don't know if it was permanent. Then his mom sent him out to California, for what he believed to be music school.

However, when he got there, arrived at the airport in L.A., his guitar case in hand, he was ambushed by tall muscular, shaved head dudes in white jackets. He must have thought, at first, that he was getting kidnapped by neo-Nazis or something. But really, he was being taken into the custody of a drug rehabilitation center! His mom had had him committed! He was cuffed, dragged away against his will, like a criminal or a dissident in a totalitarian country...

I'm not sure what became of him, after that. Not long ago, on Facebook, I saw a "friend" suggestion with his name, and a picture of an airline pilot. Was it him? Perhaps. I didn't send a request. And never did he.

Thinking back on that situation, that ending, it was pointless, a stupid thing to fight over, the spaz's drug debt. It could have been handled with more tact. And it was stupid to burn bridges.

But I guess when you got two fuckups together, not much good is going to come out of it.

It wouldn't be the last time my temper and lack of better judgment got the better of me. Especially in high school.

18

As I mentioned, I'd switched schools. I went to a private school, a small school, further away from my neighborhood, because my friend Adam, was there and wanted me to join him.

(Being in the program for fuckups wasn't too pleasant either; I was fortunate to leave such a toxic environment.)

The new school wasn't toxic, was far more laidback. And it was small, really small. Only fifty or so students. It was a Quaker school, but didn't force its beliefs on us. The only Quaker thing we were made to do was attend morning "meetings," school gatherings, where we'd sit in a circle, in silence for fifteen minutes.

One might imagine this would be difficult for teens, but I never recall an incident of anyone speaking up or causing mischief. It really would be completely, like totally, could-hear-a-pin-drop silent...

The school had a vast array of students. Nerds, outcasts, jocks, cool kids, misfits, fuckups, everything. But opposed to public school, with its cliques, there weren't cliques at the school. It was too small for that.

Everyone knew everyone. Everyone hung out, pretty much, with everyone. There was little to no bullying. I think that was the point of the school. It was a refuge from the public-school system.

There were a couple kids there who indeed couldn't function in public schools, and I can only imagine the torment they'd suffer if they did attend a place like my middle school. The Quaker school was like a sanctuary for such kids...

One such kid was an adopted girl from Thailand who'd been abused, locked in a room, in total isolation, for the first ten years of her life. As you can imagine, she had trouble functioning in social situations, was tragically awkward, and would randomly scream things at people, in Thai or English. She'd occasionally masturbate in class and have to be removed, taken to the office, and would sometimes disappear, run away for hours, sometimes days, but would always return.

Another kid was a former linebacker, who kept getting in trouble for pissing and shitting in public places. He'd drop his pants and shit anywhere. As he'd shit, he'd stare and laugh at people's reactions. He'd shit in the shower, too, and had shit in front of his teammates, several times, once on the practice field. He'd shit on the bathroom floor a few times, in our school's bathroom, which, for him, I guess was an improvement. I'm not sure if he was mental or if it was his sense of humor, his shitting. I'm guessing it was some of both.

(Another classmate I had there was Big Jim, a skinhead, but I'm not sure if he was a racist skinhead or just liked the look. He'd been dating a girl my friend also liked, and the two of them beefed over her, when my friend and her fucked while high at a party... Big Jim and my friend nearly came to blows, but settled it, with no fists being thrown, and we three ditched 5th period to smoke weed together in Big Jim's old bucket of a car.)

((I had thought it was all good. But later, my friend and his older cousin, a somewhat scary Cuban gangster type, had been talking about various insidious ways to kill the "puto" and were fucking livid about the whole situation. My friend's cousin was into Santeria, too, and said he'd thrown a curse on the skinhead.))

((I'm not sure if it was the curse, or Big Jim's youth, stupidity, but whatever it was, Big Jim was tripping on acid with his skinhead friends and was out "train-surfing," jumping from bridges down onto the top of trains, riding the trains to wherever. But when Big Jim leapt from the bridge, he fell in between the train carriages and one of his legs was ripped off by the machinery.)))

((((Amazingly, he survived, but lost his leg, and a couple girls from the school visited him in the hospital, brought him coloring books and juice boxes. He came back to our school once, only to visit, but then went elsewhere, to another school,

designed for those with disabilities. My friend and I never spoke of what happened to Big Jim, and I never heard his cousin mention it.)))))

There was another girl at the Quaker school, a girl, who like me, was the child of psychiatrists, and her dad a very famous psychiatrist. She was very sexually free and like anytime I saw her, she was openly discussing sex. She had big tits but a flat ass and super skinny body. I suspect her tits were fake.

She slept with nearly every boy at the school, but drew the line at threesomes, and when Adam and me had her over to his house, we tried to double team her, but she'd only fuck us one at a time, saying how the "last time I had a threesome, my boyfriend, Tom, got so fucking pissed," so she fucked us one at a time, which I guess her boyfriend was cooler with.

There was another girl with big tits, Jessica, who'd been attacked by a boy at her previous high school.

The boy would always comment on her large breasts, and the comments went from verbal harassment, to him forcibly touching her, and one day him trying to tear off her shirt in the hallway, after school.

She was so traumatized that, for a while, she dropped out. She'd taken to binge-eating to dull her psychic pain and had gained around thirty pounds.

Though she was chubby, she was still pretty, had a gorgeous face, a face that was practically perfect, with these high cheekbones, their symmetry complemented by her bright blue eyes and rosy cheeks. Di Vinci, I bet, would have painted her portrait. Her facial structure was that flawless...

Jessica and I became an item after I'd stopped seeing a girl who lived down the street.

That one was a heartache, far worse than the quiet girl in fifth grade...

The girl down the street, Jan, was smoking hot. She'd been the first girl I'd really been in love with, or at least what I thought was love.

She was part Egyptian, part Colombian and 100% hot. An olive-skinned exotic looking beauty with a crown of wavy long blood red dyed hair, she'd constantly be clad in sexy clothes, like hot pants and fishnet stockings.

She'd paint on tons of makeup, too, eye liner, eye shadow, and her puffy and pouty lips were usually coated fire red... And it was as if every time I saw her, she'd be smiling, sporting these sly, crooked smiles that were mesmerizing.

I'd probably be smiling too, if I was a girl that hot. If I had a face and a body like that. Her body was incredible, practically flawless. With her taut tummy, juicy thighs, callipygian curves, and perky, upturned C-cup tits. Her cleavage always compressed in tight tank tops, tits scrunched up and forming deep valleys that'd be overflowing, protruding and testing fabrics' limits.

She was a knockout. A dime. She was the first girl my age I can remember who dressed as provocatively as the ladies I'd seen in music videos.

And I liked that about her. A lot.

The lone flaw in her physiognomy was a thin, four-inch pacemaker scar over her left breast. She, as a kid, had a heart problem and a pacemaker was installed to keep her alive. It was weird to see a teenage girl with a pacemaker, but it didn't bother me. It wasn't something I gave much thought to, aside from seeing the small scar and asking her about it.

I was happy she'd survived her heart problem and that she was alive and with me. In fact, I was gaga over her.

We met through a mutual friend, who set us up, and it turned out she lived down the street in this wickedly fucked up, dilapidated house that was painted the ugliest slime green color and looked like something from a horror movie. I'd always wondered who lived there and was shocked to discover it was such a pretty girl.

She was a year younger than me, in the grade below me, at another school. It was the first time I'd been with a "younger" girl...

Jan and I would hang out at my house or hers, smoke weed, and make out, for like an hour. She was a great kisser. Usually it'd go as far as her jerking me off and me fingering her. She was so smoking hot and her handjob technique was so perfect that she'd strangle my cock into spitting submission with deft quickness and expert precision. She could have been a professional masseuse the way she stroked...

She'd only be able to stay over at my house for a short time, her domineering mother keeping close tabs on her, so once I'd cum, she'd have to leave shortly after. (I hoped she was also coming, and given how creamy her cunt would be, I'm guessing she did...)

Finally, though, I had to stick more than my fingers in her, and as we made out, I swiftly stopped her soft stroking hand before it could bring me to paradise, and I brought her over to the bed.

(This was in my stepsister's room, which I'd taken over, after she'd been kicked out. I was now occupying the entire third floor. And I'd trashed my stepsister's room, too, spray painting, graffiti scrawled, covering the walls. My friends and I partying in there, my mother too focused, busy with work to know or care much...)

So, I brought Jan to the bed and was about to fuck her, raw, when she asked me if I had a condom.

Smart girl. Smarter than me.

I rose from the bed to go get a rubber from my desk drawer, but I stopped in my tracks when I smelled a gross, burning plastic stench. I panned my mien over to the garbage can and saw it was on fire! A still-lit cigarette the likely culprit.

I ran over to put it out with some water. Fortunately, I didn't burn the house down. (There had to be something with that house and fire, I figure.)

But when I came back, the mood was killed. The room stank like burning plastic. My throat was burning. I just couldn't get excited, couldn't get hard. It was the first time I'd failed sexually.

She was disappointed. I was embarrassed. We didn't see or talk to each other for a couple days.

Then we got together one night, got high, snorted coke, and I wasted no time and fucked her, hard.

Although her mom called as we just finished, so there was no round two.

I found out later, through the grapevine, that the whole time I'd seen her, she'd been with other dudes. Lots of other dudes. Lots and lots and lots.

Stories emerged. Sordid stories of her and this crackhead, homeless guy, a thirty or fortyish guy we called “Dirty Jeff,” who hung out with teens and bought us beer, partied with us.

She and this crackhead had made out. He’d fingered her. Fucked her.

Dirty Jeff and these other crackheads had smoked crack with her, and it became a tradition for them to tie her up, strip her naked, cover her in chocolate sauce and several of them at once would lick it off her, random guys would fuck her, in front of tons of people at parties.

But the craziest was a story of Jan, at one party, being tied up, stripped, and fucked with hot dogs, two of them at the same time, in front of a laughing, gawking crowd.

This was, fortunately, before the days of smartphones. Such an event would surely go viral, in this day and age, in the 2020s.

Perhaps one might think this was forced on her, nonconsensual. But it wasn’t. She was moaning, enjoying the experience, laughing. A good time was had by all. Except me. Finding out this girl, the first I’d ever really been into, one I considered my girlfriend, was getting fucked by hot dogs, by crackheads, at a party, in front of a ton of people.

Rumors about the incident spread all over town, like a bad rash...

It wasn’t exactly the best way to begin my relationship with women. Which leads back to Jessica, who, sadly, would have to pay the price for this later.

Crazy enough, I’d broken up with Jan before discovering her exploits.

She’d broken up with me first, actually, gone back to this guy she’d been seeing, who used to brag about shaving her pussy.

She’d then come back to me, or at least fucked me, and then had asked to be my girlfriend, to which I refused.

(I’d refused because her friend had told me that Jan couldn’t help but cheat on any and every boyfriend she ever had. It was a compulsion of hers.)

It was after I turned down her offer that I discovered the “hot dog” story.

I spoke with a friend of mine about it, years later, and he said it was wrong to remember her by just that event. That she's more than simply that event. It's only one part of who she is or was. And he's right. People generally shouldn't be remembered for their worst moment, particularly when it's one that happened in youth, high on drugs, and no one got killed or anything. She wasn't one of the Columbine shooters or some shit...

We reconnected, years later, Jan and I, on Facebook. She said that through the "fog of adolescence" she couldn't remember why we broke up, stopped talking.

I did. I remember everything vividly. But I couldn't bring myself to enlighten her on the details. Maybe, through selective memory or because of drug use, blackouts, she doesn't even know. It's probably best that way.

And I hold absolutely no animosity towards her. I wish her the best.

She's become a beautiful grown woman, has a husband, two kids, and is an elementary school teacher in a West Coast state. She's a wine connoisseur.

It makes me think how we don't have one life, on this planet. We have many lives. Her past life is just that. A past life.

19

Hearing of Jan's exploits, at the time, scarred me, deeply. And poor Jessica, she had to bear the brunt of it.

Jessica, Jessica, she was a lovely girl, nice, sweet as sugar. She really was.

Her bedroom was painted hot pink and covered in teen girl things. Stuffed animals, cute small things, colorful stickers of Care Bears and unicorns and posters of the "hot" guys of the day, popular bands of the day like Pantera and Green Day. She even had a picture of James Dean taped to her vanity mirror.

Like Jan, I'd been set up with her through a mutual friend.

It was the night after Christmas, the first time we got together. My friend, Jimmy, was dating her friend Mary.

The four of us had this incredible night. We drove around, joyriding in my car (an old fucked-up Toyota my mom helped get me- I'd paid the other part from odd-jobs- my mom saying she was sick of being my "chauffeur" and carpooling, driving me to school... I'd finally passed my driving test on the third attempt, after snorting coke to amp me up for it. The DMV test administrator said she'd never seen someone complete the test so quickly. I guess drugs aren't always bad!)

Back to the night after Christmas. It was magical. We ripped bong hits, listened to Enigma. It was the first time I'd heard such music, the hip hop beats, the Gregorian chants. It was fantastic and a perfect soundtrack.

Jimmy, wanting privacy with Mary, and being a bro, led Jessica and I to his parents' room. They were out of town.

(This is how it usually went down in high school. Whoever's parents were at work or away on a trip or out wherever, that was the house we congregated at.)

Jimmy jokingly said something to the effect of "check out this tie...", holding up his father's necktie, and darting out of the room.

I wasted no time getting on Jessica. I went straight in, kissed her, and undressed her, laid her on the bed.

I tied her arms up, playfully, with Jimmy's dad's neckties, and disrobed. Then I lost all sense, as teens do.

I mounted her and began having sex with her. Without a condom.

We'd been laughing as I tied her up, but when I penetrated her, I remember she instantly closed her eyes and began moaning, breathing heavily.

Fuck, it was soooooo warm. I'd banged a couple other girls, but with condoms. This was the first time I'd fucked without one, and it was far superior, almost like nature's way of ensuring the continuation of the human race, making it that much better raw.

As I fucked, she whispered in my ear that I should put on a condom, but I didn't stop and get one. I didn't pull out either when I came, busting right up inside her, with a hefty teen load.

We saw each other regularly after this, and, for the first few weeks, it was bliss. The vaunted “honeymoon” period. We went at it like rabbits. Never once using condoms.

I wished later that we had.

I also wish, in retrospect, that I hadn’t been such a terrible cunt to her.

She was a doll. No way she’d have been cheating on me, fucking other dudes, but after Jan, I just couldn’t trust women, and took it out on Jessica.

I’d get super jealous over nothing. Freak out. Yell at her. Over nothing. I’d start fights. Basically be a total prick. Over nothing.

She’d usually just shake her head, roll her eyes. Other times, she’d stomp off, often lock herself in the bathroom.

I’d stand outside the bathroom door, slapping on it, begging her to come out, seeing floaters, and eventually apologizing. Then she’d come out, her lips pursed, eyes narrowed. Her angry look was really sexy, I have to say. Then I’d apologize again, hold her hand, and lead her back to my room, where we’d smoke weed and fuck.

It became all we did, fighting and fucking. Fighting and fucking.

(And hell, could she fuck too, like a porn star... And as much as she was into sex, she was also highly religious, going to church every Sunday, and she’d be seriously pissed off if I ever said “goddamn” and would castigate me for using the “Lord’s name in vain.” That’d always pour gasoline onto the fire, accelerate our quarrels...)

I really can’t say what came over me, why I picked so many fights, why I was such an asshole. I can’t blame it on Jan. Honestly, I felt possessed. It was like another person doing it. A demon inside me. So angry. So hateful. If I saw myself doing that, now, if I saw video of it, I’d be so ashamed. Looking back on it, I was fucking horrible to her.

But that wasn’t the worst part. The worst part was that she’d gotten pregnant.

We were too young to have the baby, and so we went and got an abortion.

It still haunts me, to this day. The experience. Going there, that cold, damp, spring morning. Pulling into the parking lot and seeing these protesters outside the abortion clinic. Some were holding hands in a circle, murmuring prayers. Others were holding up Jesus signs, quotes from the Bible.

An armed guard and a lady in a bulletproof vest escorted us inside.

In there, in the lobby, that resembled any doctor's office lobby, were all couples our same age, teens, early twenties. Before they began the procedures, a nurse had a word with us, told us the girls would be stitched up, sore for a few weeks and that we'd not be able to have sex.

This one jovial Black girl, who'd been talkative, cracking jokes, quipped that "guess we gonna have to do it in the ass, then."

The mood was nervous, but light, until the procedures started. The Black girl was one of the first to go back to the operating rooms, and when she came back, she looked like she'd seen a ghost. Any trace of joy erased, washed clean from her blanched face.

While Jessica went back, another guy whose girlfriend went back too, joined me for a smoke outside. We made small talk. Didn't say anything about what was going on, but it was the unspoken elephant in the room. We were too young to completely comprehend it, I think, which is probably a good thing.

When Jessica came back, she too was blanched, distraught.

I drove her back to my house. She was tired, sad, cried a lot. Said how the doctor told her she had "lovely rosy cheeks" and that he'd stuck a vacuum tube type hose inside her...

When she passed out for a while, in my arms, I left the room because a wave of emotion hit me and I needed to cry. I cried for the first time in a while. I cried a lot, like a baby. I cried so hard that I shook, wheezed and convulsed.

When I came back, she was awake and upset that I'd left, asking where I was. I hadn't the heart to disclose the truth. That I had left the room because I didn't want Jessica to see me acting like a bitch, but, in retrospect, not being able to tell her made me even more of a bitch.

In the days following, she said how guilty she was. How wherever she went, she thought people knew. Like everyone was looking at her, judging her, thinking what a horrible person she was.

After the abortion, we didn't fight as much, but when we did, it was usually her starting it.

A lot of anger, on her part, lingered. She didn't bring up the abortion, save for a couple times when she screamed at me for abandoning her that morning and not being there when she woke up.

Never having kids, I think back on that time. Would I have been a better person if we had the kid? Would the kid have come out healthy? Jessica was smoking cigarettes, drinking, smoking weed. The baby probably would have been damaged, premature, unhealthy, but who knows...

Who knows how my life would have been different if I were a father. Perhaps it'd have been better, made me responsible, had me make better life choices.

I'll always wonder, too, if it would have been a girl or boy.

As bad as it was for me, for her it was way worse. It's a pain she'll carry forever.

20

Unlike other classmates, after we broke up, I never heard from Jessica again.

Following our breakup, which I instigated, after tiring of constantly fighting with her, she demanded I return all the presents she ever gave me, including a pet lizard.

She even threatened to call the cops on me, tell them I had drugs. She was that pissed off. Around this time, I began running with a rugged crew of ruffians, thugs, and a friend of mine offered to "take care of her," whatever that meant, I didn't want to know, and I politely declined.

Jessica transferred to another school and wasn't there when I showed up to return all her things, the lizard, and other gifts to her house. Her mother, who'd always been nice to me, met me at the front door and wished me well. She was a sweet lady, like her daughter.

Never have I come across her on social media or gotten any friend requests from her.

I'm not surprised, nor would I initiate any contact with her. I'm sure she reviles me, and rightfully so. I certainly hold no ill will against her. I didn't have another steady girlfriend after her for eight years.

Later, after our breakup, she went through her "slut phase," went on a spree, banging all sorts of dudes, freaking off with girls too.

She had a threesome with my friend Jimmy, in part, I think, as an act of revenge.

Jimmy, she, and Jimmy's girlfriend went to prom together, at Jessica's new school, and got frisky with one another later that night.

It didn't bother me, them being together. I'd broken up with her, didn't have any feelings left for her, was tired of her, fighting with her, didn't want anything more to do with her, not that I hated or disliked her, I'd simply moved on, which is what I think bothered her most, especially as she cried on the phone during our last conversation, cursed and called me names, and I was calm and apathetic.

I've never heard from her or of her since.

Or of Jimmy. We'd stopped hanging out later on after I'd gotten into harder drugs, running with a tougher crowd. I'd been an asshole to him too, a few times fucking with him, teasing him. One time another guy and I throwing lit cigarettes at him while we all were tripping on acid and Jimmy getting fed up and storming off.

We even stole one of his shoes and the poor kid had to limp home, tripping on acid, with only one shoe on. Fuck, we were bastards...

I heard from a mutual friend that Jimmy tried to commit suicide later by taking tons of pills but didn't die. His older brother, though, who I only met once, and was quite a chill dude, unfortunately, had killed himself, I'd heard. I'm not sure how or why...

Last I heard of Jimmy was from my friend Cam, who met Jimmy when Jimmy was working in a camera store, and had tried to sell Jimmy a used set of home stereo speakers and Jimmy never returned Cam's phone calls, which pissed Cam off. I

never saw or heard of Jimmy since and probably wouldn't even recognize him if I passed him on the street.

There's a ton of people I knew, grew up with, was friends with, who I might not know or recognize if I passed on the street. Strange how that works. I don't know them anymore, really, anyway, I only know their past selves, their past lives. I only know their ghosts. Funny, though, how if I saw one of them, in the 2020s, and we did recognize each other, it'd probably take us back to high school, instantly, like a time machine...

Back to this time, after my breakup with Jessica, it was then that I took a serious plunge into hard and harder drugs. Cocaine, namely.

21

Like Rick James said, cocaine is a "hell of a drug."

The first time I tried coke, I was at my friend Taylor's house, in his basement, where we'd always get high.

Taylor had gotten his hands on an eight ball of cocaine.

I'd never tried it but had always wanted to. It seemed so fucking cool in movies. The gangsters using switchblades to slice open plastic bags of cocaine. The gangsters, dudes in bandanas, dudes with lots of tats, shadowy dudes with knives in hand, tasting, licking or snorting white powdery bumps off their shiny silver blades.

There'd been tons of flicks with rock stars snorting lines, too, and it just seemed so fucking awesome, the ultimate party, posh drug.

The first time I snorted it, it was slightly rough, going up my nose, but the ensuing rush was like nothing else.

It made me so alive. Euphoric. Charged me up. Made me feel invincible.

But the comedown was terrible. It was the saddest, groggiest, worst feeling of shit. I'd heard that those on heroin would have nausea, painful withdrawals. I never experienced that from coke, I just would be down, out of it and grumpy.

The crappy comedown feeling is what made me want to snort more, formulating a vicious cycle.

At the beginning of it, though, I didn't get hooked. I could snort a little here, there. But later, as my tolerance grew, the cocaine began to take over me. It was like a demon.

The demon wanted the rush. The high. The demon would eventually seize control and would be the first thing on my mind when I'd wake up. The demon wanting me to score, snort coke...

I had started off snorting occasionally, but as the demon exerted more force, cocaine, the rush, the feeling was all I wanted, all I thought of. It was the devil, that shit. I'd gone from ME doing IT to IT doing ME.

And to feed my demon's insatiable urge, I started to sell coke to classmates, cutting it with aspirin before I sold it so I could make more money, keep more of the coke in my own nose.

I'd smoke it too. Sprinkle coke on weed, hit it from the bong. Smoke joints laced with it.

But my tolerance grew like cancer. And I could no longer sustain my habit on sales alone, so I resorted to stealing. From myself.

I sold off and pawned my musical instruments that I'd stopped playing. I sold my guitars. I sold my TV. I'd have sold my soul, too, if I could have. I guess, in a way, though, I sorta did...

That was rock bottom, I think. Selling those instruments to feed my coke habit. I still shudder and die a little inside anytime I reflect on it.

22

The three-day coke binges got worse. Although I probably would have died or killed someone else if I'd had more access to PCP.

I smoked it a few times, and, holy shit, did it fuck me up.

I'd even given some to a couple friends who'd trip on acid, at school, regularly, and it had them so wrecked they could barely handle it.

I had more powerful hallucinations on PCP than I did on acid. On acid, I mostly knew what I was seeing, the colors, the images, I knew it was a trip, but on PCP I believed the things I was seeing were real.

Like once I was taking a taxi home from a friend's house, late at night, after smoking PCP, and the lady cabdriver appeared to me to have a tall spiky purple mohawk. The whole ride I stared at the mohawk, thinking how fucking weird it was to see a lady cabdriver with a mohawk, why did she have it, was she in a punk rock band or what?

Then I started thinking this lady might be a serial killer. That she was taking me to die somewhere. That she had murder tools, a chainsaw in her trunk. I really believed it. I was thinking I might end up hacked to death, pieces of my body in a dumpster. So then I started plotting on strangling her from behind, a preemptive strike, to prevent her from attacking me and chopping me to death with her chainsaw.

But then we arrived at my house and she turned on the light in the cab and I saw that she didn't have a mohawk. In fact, she looked normal as could be, and I realized I wouldn't have to strangle her. But if she really did have that mohawk, I don't know what I'd have done...

People have done far worse on PCP, such as winding up like Rodney King, fucked up by cops, or like this Charles Manson looking guy I saw when I was a kid, a couple blocks from my house, who was fighting with the police. The Charles Manson guy in his teal pajamas, screaming and growling like an animal, his dick rock hard as the cops struggled to restrain him.

(It was around the same time, in California, where we'd vacationed to escape the hurricane season and muggy Miami summer, and when I'd answer the phone and receive these obscene, bizarre phone calls, from a guy mumbling, moaning and cursing. The first few times I hung up, but then I started cursing back at him before hanging up, which only made him angrier. I'd found out later that the Nightstalker and Golden State Killer were active at this time and making such

phone calls. Was it one of them? I'd like to think I cursed out one of those shitbirds...)

((It would be my second experience cursing out or making an obscene gesture at someone famous. As a teen, before I got into the yay-yo, I'd been walking down the street with my friend, another teen, and we were both smoking cigarettes. Who did we see at the local car dealership nearby? None other than Al Gore. We looked at him, pointed and laughed, because we knew who he was. He eyed us, sternly, with a disapproving expression, upon seeing us smoking, and, none too happy with him giving us the evil eye, I flicked him the bird, and my friend and me took off running.))

23

As for our cocaine supplier at this time, it was through a friend of a friend that we'd met a cop who was selling drugs... He was a fantastic connection for coke and had been supplying many around the local area. His prices were great, and his products were top-notch, especially his pure Bolivian flake...

He had the perfect racket. He could buy from large suppliers, who were getting it directly from sources in South America, and he could have any competitors arrested. He had informants. He had supply. He was making cash hand over fist but was smart, low-key, wasn't dressing too flashy, drove a Subaru.

His whole situation was a perfect reason for paying public servants more as well as legalizing all drugs (in my opinion).

Unfortunately for us, though, the cop disappeared, fucking vanished, like Jimmy Hoffa, like milk carton, missing poster type shit, and was never heard from again. I'd like to think he'd been stacking his cash and escaped to South America, is living out his days on a white sandy beach somewhere. Or he could have been fish food at the bottom of a river or eaten up by alligators in the Everglades. Either outcomes highly probable in the Miami drug trade.

24

In terms of hard drugs, the worst shit I ever touched, worse than PCP, worse than cocaine, was crystal meth. No drug ever fucked me up more than that.

I'd been on binges with coke, where I'd be up for three days at a time, no sleep, just snorting coke, smoking cigarettes and weed. I wouldn't eat much during these times and lost a lot of weight.

Meth, though, the first time I did it, and the only time, had me up for almost a week. And as luck would have it, this was around the start of the school year, my second year, at the little Quaker school.

To start the year, we'd go on this camping trip, one of a few we'd do annually, at a park way out in the Everglades.

It was splendid out there in the Glades, so scenic, such serene tropical beauty. Of course, we were too young to appreciate, or care much at all about the nature, and on these camping trips most of us would spend the whole-time fucking, drinking, doing drugs and basically being degenerates. For punks like us, a trip like this was bliss. Disneyworld for juvenile delinquents like me and my ilk.

I almost didn't make it there. In fact, it would have been better if I hadn't gone...

I'd been on a coke binge for a few days and had finally gotten to sleep when I awoke to my friend, Jimmy, banging on my door.

We had to go on the camping trip, he told me. I'd totally forgotten.

I got myself together, somewhat, and we headed out in my car, smoking weed from a small metal pipe as we drove there.

On the highway, being so fucked up, I almost lost control of the wheel and hit a road sign. It was a good thing Jimmy was alert enough to grab the wheel and right us, saving us from a terrible collision. Thinking back on that, since he saved our lives, I really should give him a pass on fucking my ex-girlfriend...

I was selling increasingly bigger quantities of drugs, around then, and had quit a part-time job I'd had at a record store (since it was starting to cost me money, being at that job, making me miss opportunities to sell drugs, though I did at least get lots of free CDs from the store, which was rad).

Realizing the lucrative business opportunity of being on a camping trip with a ton of young drug fiends, I prepared accordingly, and before leaving, I'd packed a shitload of small bags and a pound of weed, a few grams of coke, and brought a tiny bag of meth, which I'd not tried, but was looking forward to experimenting with.

When we got to the campsite, I sold the weed, at lightning speed, to my classmates. One of them was this girl, who'd lived near me and was going to ride to school with me that semester. Her dad had talked to me on the phone before I began taking her, I guess since she was a year or two younger, and I guess he wanted to see if I was "okay."

I don't remember any word of the conversation, except that it happened.

Having had his introduction to his daughter, when I met her at the campsite, I'd found quickly that she liked smoking weed, and we smoked together, in the girls bathroom, and she blew me in there and we fucked a couple times in the woods, her standing at a tree, her arms hugging it as I fucked her from behind, no condom, but I'd pulled out, came on her ass. (I'd learned my lesson about busting wads, rawdog, up in girls...)

(She, like the psychiatrist's daughter, also had a tiny, flat ass, and wasn't as pretty, had a slightly blockish, masculine face and short pink hair. But like the psychiatrist's daughter, she was blessed with jiggly juice tits, and was sort of tall, like 5'8, with long, slim centerfold legs, and I liked that about her. Her pussy was tight and exquisite, shaped like a flower in bloom.)

A new friend I'd made, Peter, and I smoked and snorted the meth, the first night of the camping trip.

It completely jolted me, the meth. Reminded me of coke, but stronger, more intense. I'd didn't sleep a wink that night.

The next day I remember this idiot spastic kid who'd always wear an L.A. Dodgers hat and overalls. He'd declared proudly that he'd smoke cigarettes the entire camping trip, chain-smoke them, smoke every single minute of the trip, and the next morning we saw him carried away on a stretcher, from having nicotine poisoning, and as he was being put into the ambulance, we laughed and pointed

at him, earning one bespectacled elderly female teacher's forceful condemnation of our thoughtlessness.

That second night, we had a campfire, and the meth I'd been smoking, along with weed and sleep deprivation were hitting me like slaps to the face and while I sat by the fire with my new drug friends and the tree-hugger girl, I began to see intense hallucinations in the fire.

I saw a cop car, on fire, smashing into a high-rise office building and blew up, and then people were being shot, people in business suits, being shot dead. I was seeing these businesspeople gunned down in streets around Brickell, Biscayne Bay by machine guns and handguns that were held by invisible forces, just guns floating, cutting through the air, shooting and blasting off randomly, the bloodied business people's bodies dropping, piling into city streets. It was vivid, like the fire flames were a crystal ball...

I don't remember anything else from that night. Other than being back in the girls bathroom, fucking the tree girl again, in a stall, her spread eagle atop a toilet.

The following morning, after breakfast, the headmaster of the school pulled me aside, behind a cabin, for a word in private. The headmaster was a rather creepy, squirrely old fellow with these perpetually askew, narrow black-rimmed eyeglasses and always with a look on his face like he was trying to lift something heavy. I remember the old bird'd wear corduroys and flannel shirts no matter the weather or location. He usually was rather meek, so it surprised me when he approached me, speaking forcefully, with eyes of rage.

We stood in the shade, behind the wooden cabin, and he lashed out, spittle forming in the corner of his tiny mouth as he told me, directly, that he didn't like me and didn't want me in his school and that the only reason I'd been asked back was that a few of the teachers liked me.

Not a wonderful thing to say to a teen. Especially an "at-risk" teen.

(It really was doubly off-putting, upsetting in that he was generally so non-confrontational and quiet. So for him to act out, so out of character, act that way, it totally took me off-guard.)

I didn't react well to it. Was quite shocked he'd said such words to me. At first, I didn't say a word, didn't know how to respond. I just stood there, behind that cabin, feeling like I got hit by a truck. It saddened me at first, to hear a teacher say what he did. But the sadness quickly shifted to anger. And I decided, fuck this shit, and gathered my things, went to my car and began to leave.

The headmaster saw me leaving, saw I was pissed and saw me telling the tree-girl about what'd happened, telling her that I was going to split. He called me over, possibly to smooth things over, but I was beyond reproach at this point. I was incensed, and I cursed him out, got in my car, spun the wheels loudly, cranked up the Gravediggaz' "6 Feet Deep" and sped off, bass booming through the swamp.

(I'll never forget the look on the headmaster's face, one of shock, anger and helplessness. I remember his jaw quivering. He didn't have the guts to speak back to me and had been cursed out in front of several students, which I'm guessing had probably never happened to him. The tree-hugger girl also stood frozen in shock, unsure of what to say or do.)

I was completely blitzed, driving off, to where, I didn't know. I hadn't slept much in weeks. I was angry, sleep deprived and fucked up on weed, coke, and meth, and, being a teen behind the wheel of a car, driving fast, on a twisting, small gravel road in the far reaches of the Glades, it wasn't a good combination and didn't augur to much of a positive outcome...

I didn't get far before I crashed into a palm tree, putting a huge U-shaped dent in the front of my car.

One might think this was a bad thing, and it was, but it could have been far worse. Another guy from the same school, years earlier, had also been driving fucked up on the same road (not sure if he also had an argument with the headmaster) but he'd skidded off the road and not hit a tree and instead his car plunged down into the swamp. He died.

Unlike the girl from my class earlier, who died from hitting a tree, this tree, likely, SAVED my life!

Incredibly, too (the Japanese sure can build an automobile!) my car was still able to be driven, and I made it to a service station next to the highway nearby. Right

as I pulled into the service station's lot, the hood began billowing smoke and the car died.

I got a tow, about two hours from there to my house. The redneck truck driver and I didn't say a word the whole time. I listened to the Gravediggaz' first tape on my Walkman the whole way home. That and Bone Thugs were my favorites at the time...

When I got home, my mom, seeing the totaled car, completely flipped out, screamed at me so much that I stomped off, and I spent a couple days sleeping off the meth in my friend's backyard (he was out of town). For a couple days, I lived like a bum in his backyard's thicket of bamboo trees, palm trees, grass and flower bushes.

(During those days, I'd lived on a diet of donuts, McDonald's, and had drunk urine a couple times, the first night I was there, when my sleep deprived, diseased mind told me that a demon named Saul was living inside me and that drinking piss would set it free. Once I'd finally slept, though, the voices silenced, and I didn't drink any more piss.)

I came back home later and discovered that I was kicked out of the private school. My mother had been forced to withdraw me or she'd lose the tuition money.

The school thought I was too out-of-control and couldn't be part of the community there.

They were partially right, but I was upset to find out later that another kid, who'd gotten in trouble, equal amounts, more, even, though never argued with the headmaster, was given second chances, third chances, fourth and fifth, after being caught in many situations by the school, a couple involving him being found with drugs in his possession.

(I think, in reflection, I was truly an "at-risk" kid, and the school should have tried to help me. Sent me to rehab. Done something to intervene. Instead they simply turned their collective backs on me, probably out of spite from the headmaster for cursing him out. Obviously, I was in the wrong, but as an adult, looking back on it, that school failed me, failed to help a youth who desperately needed its help...)

I found out later, though, the reason the boy with a million chances had had all those chances. It was because he had been snitching out people to the headmaster, which is why a couple people the year before got expelled for various infractions.

And soon after I was kicked out, the snitch was again caught with a bag of weed, by the school, and told on everyone. I guess they demanded more names. The administration went in hard, too, several people were searched, kicked out of the school, and it seemed like the administration was a step ahead, knew way more than we'd have expected.

But the remaining stoners there smartened up. They stopped smoking weed at lunch, stopped bringing drugs to school. They'd instead smoke weed before and after school, or pop pills, drop acid, do drugs easy to conceal. It really is nearly impossible to stop a determined drug user. You'd think the world would have realized that by then, certainly by now...

The snitch, we discovered was a zit-faced ginger kid named Phillip, and he'd confessed his snitching to this chubby girl he was banging, who told everyone else later, after he'd stolen money from her.

(That chubby girl had gone to our school, but left after she had a baby, at home, in her bed. She'd hidden the pregnancy from everyone, and since she was plus-size, I guess it was easy for her to conceal the baby bump. Fortunately, she and the baby survived the ordeal, that bloody, morning mess of placenta and chaos, but she never returned to the school after that. I don't know what happened to her. I did hear the baby was placed in foster care... And I don't know if the baby was Phillip's...)

Phillip's idiocy didn't stop at stealing money from girls and snitching on classmates, he'd later gotten caught selling weed at an Oasis concert, then snitched on his supplier, to avoid jail.

The supplier was a super-rich kid, this nerdy guy, who'd gone to our school. Based on his White Urkel appearance, I'd never have expected him to sell drugs, especially large quantities. This guy's sprawling mansion got raided by the cops over Phillip's snitching. But his parents had the cash, connections to get the case

thrown out on a technicality, the mountain of weed the cops found inadmissible as evidence.

In the days following the raid, Phillip's luck ran out. A crazed attacker in a ski mask ambushed Phillip in a parking lot, and beat him, savagely, nearly to death, with a baseball bat, left Phillip paralyzed from the waist down, in a wheelchair for life.

(I can't say I know for sure it was the nerdy rich kid who hired the attacker, but I think it was... Although it could have been random. Or it could have been another person Phillip snitched on. But I suspect the nerdy kid since it happened immediately following the raid of his house, and because he easily had the cash to make it happen. Not to mention his family had the police connections to know who snitched. However, again, I can't be certain, but for Phillip, as much as I hated him, I didn't wish that on him. That incident definitely altered the course of his life, for sure...)

Soon enough, my house got raided by the cops too, but not because of Phillip.

25

After I got kicked out of the private school, I returned to the school I'd attended before, with the program for fucked up kids.

Although I didn't attend class much. I skipped most days, sleeping in, showing up late, if at all. I was more interested in getting high. The few times I'd go were to sell weed or coke.

And when I would go, I'd snort coke in the bathroom, or smoke weed in the woods behind school.

When I'd first attended the school, I was a skinny young freshman, wasn't exactly imposing.

(Back in my freshman year, I'd had a strange tick. I'd worn a Phoenix Suns hat the first day of school, one I'd found on a bench at a restaurant. I didn't even like or care about the team. But I liked the hat, its royal purple color and flaming sun logo, and I wore the hat every day to school, never coming to school without it. I'd wear it in gym class. I'd wear it in rain, heat, or cold. I just felt like I had to wear

it... A girl in my class once said to another girl, "He wears that hat every day," and my teacher asked me if I wore the hat in "the shower." I didn't. I just wore it to school. Every day. But when I returned to that school, I never wore it. I'd shaved my head down to the skin. It suited my "hardcore" image of the time. I occasionally wore an L.A. Raiders skullcap, however not as compulsively as the first hat.)

Returning to the school, the program, I was an elder statesman, running things. The head dealer for the school. Though my reign at the top of the school's drug pyramid wouldn't be enduring...

The crew I ran with had been busted by our school's rent-a-pig security guards, outside of the school, on the football field. They'd been ditching first period to smoke a fat joint of the skunk. I'd have probably been with them too, if I wasn't also ditching first period, as usual. To sleep in. 7:00 a.m. was far too early for me then...

As stated, I wasn't with them when they were caught skunk in hand, but when I showed up to school later, the security guards, met me at the school's front door, knowing I'd probably have drugs too, since I was usually with those dudes. Of course, one of the guys caught could have snitched, too. I'm not sure.

However the school knew, they knew, and a whole pack of pissed off, balding, middle-aged rent-a-pigs burst out from behind the entryway's sliding blue doors and with their big bellies flopping, they circled me, baring their coffee stained fangs.

They certainly would find drugs on my person. But not much. Because recently, my friend Cam had been snitched on, his house raided. Paranoid I might be next, I'd cleared out most of my stash from my house, was leaving my supplies at a girl I'd been banging's house...

It had scared the shit out of me, what happen to Cam...

More about that...

Cam, who I'd mentioned before, the first of us to drive, the dude with the VW Beetle, had blossomed into a successful suburban drug trader, an illicit entrepreneur. He started off selling small Ziploc baggies of weed to friends and

classmates and moved up to selling freezer bags, ounces and keys of coke, weed, and sheets of LSD, to lower-level dealers.

He'd dropped out of high school and had made enough cash to rent himself a townhouse near the local community college, and it became the party house. Fuckup central.

The house began as mostly just stoners on couches and loveseats, beanbags in the living room doing bong hits, but as we sank deeper into coke, and Cam started moving more weight, the people, like the drugs, got more hardcore.

Like the police officer (who I mentioned before) Cam bought most of his coke and weed from, who'd come by with these increasingly scary, heavily-tatted, roughneck street types, and they'd sell variegated contraband to us and others, usually in the kitchen.

But the worst guy to turn up had to be Ben, who'd moved into one of the bedrooms. I don't know who brought him in, or where he came from. No one I knew, aside from Cam, knew him; no one had gone to school with him. And I never asked Cam where Ben had come from or how they knew each other. It was sort of like one day, Ben just appeared, materialized like an apparition.

He looked the part, too, like a ghost, a phantasm; he looked dead. Ben was ghastly pale, pale as cocaine. Dude looked like a walking corpse, although unlike most of us, who were skinny, he was obese, huge, yet strangely agile, quick, like a sumo wrestler.

But he was no Asian. I think he was of Irish or Scottish heritage because he had fire red hair and a perpetually puffy reddish fish face full of acne. He always wore plain black shirts too small for his big belly and these tight black jeans that rode up high and showed his ankles. Like a big, white, goth Urkel.

(Although when he'd go to work, he'd wear well-tailored, solid black three-piece suits that'd be perfectly starched and creased. He must have taken the clothes to the drycleaners...)

I think he was strung out on coke before he moved in but worsened the longer he stayed. He'd snort thick, finger-size lines, too, Tony Montana, Scarface train rails.

Not only was he constantly amped, a snorting fiend, and discomfiting aesthetically, Ben also had a noticeable presence to him. One that sent a chill over the stoners. Whenever he'd enter the living room during bong hit sessions, everyone would just get quiet and uncomfortable. Like the temperature in the room would drop ten degrees.

Maybe it was because of his work. Ben was in the funeral services industry, was an embalmer, and if you went into his room, it was like entering death.

There were satanic, death and black metal posters all over the walls. Venom. Cannibal Corpse. Cradle of Filth. Anal Cunt.

He'd sit in front of his TV, which was always on, watching videos of horror movies, snuff films, documentaries about mass killings, serial killers, car accidents, natural disasters, "Faces of Death" videos, and plane crashes.

He kept the AC blasted, fucking frigid cold. His room, too, was consistently kept dark, the windows taped over with heavy black garbage bags. Ben once said something to me about hating the sun. That he believed he could eliminate time by covering the windows. That he'd read about it in a Philip K. Dick novel, and that he refused to wear a watch because it made him feel like time was chasing after him, cutting into his hand...

I was one of the few to brave going into Ben's room. First off, because I've always appreciated eccentric, weird people, being that way, slightly, myself. And because he'd offered me free coke. In addition, I shared his affinity for sci fi/horror books and films.

Aside from me and Cam, none of the other folks in the house, living there or just crashing there, dared to venture into his chamber of darkness. Nor did they like him.

But, at least at first, they'd never mention anything to Cam about their disdain for Ben. Probably because they bought their substances from Cam and Cam and Ben were (for some unknown reason) tight as glue. Cam would always call Ben "his boy" and vaguely mention something about "all the shit he did for me."

Ben didn't leave the townhouse much, except for work, so we were all surprised when he brought home a girl, Stella, who lived with him in the house, from the day she arrived.

Stella was petite, with a small head, and short bowl haircut of sandy brown hair that hung like a halfmoon over her roundish face. Her big green bug eyes almost jumped off her skull and she had bad teeth. But she was blessed with a surprisingly supple, curvaceous body. Her skin had looked almost a wolf gray type color when I first saw her, but she got paler and whiter the longer she stayed in the house. Probably, because like Ben, she rarely went outside.

She'd often slink around the house wearing only a t-shirt, and most everyone caught passing glimpses of her hairy snatch.

And, as Ben got more and more strung out on coke, hardly ever leaving his room, even for work, Stella started to fuck everyone. All the stoners, me, the cop, the roughneck street thugs. Even Cam, though he tried to pass it off saying how he was drunk and she'd left her shirt on the whole time and it "only was a couple minutes."

Stella, well, she was one weird, weird chick. Maybe she liked Ben because she was into death. Really into death. That's all she talked about. Death. What happens when you die, ghosts, murders, psychic mediums, reincarnation.

She said she only liked to listen to artists who'd died because their music was more profound that way.

Hendrix, The Doors. She wouldn't even listen to anything new, saying how she'd wait until the artist died, because then "you could truly understand them..."

The cop brought a particularly strange fellow over one day, a short stocky Mexican guy with a lazy eye, speech impediment and a twitchy arm. The Mexican guy wore well-ironed khakis, a plain white t-shirt, and a black knit cap that covered most of his eyelids. I remember he called everyone "foo" and sold us bags of PCP and meth.

Once the meth and PCP made their rounds, shit really hit the fan at the house.

Ben began to emerge from his room a lot more and had somehow come into possession of a baby pig. The animal would shit everywhere, and Ben and Stella

would often walk around the house, cradling the little oinking pig like a baby, singing lullabies to it.

Ben would frequently interrupt our bong circle. He'd be in tears, brandishing a machete, threatening to kill himself or to cut off one of his fingers for one reason or another, although he was talked down pretty easily by sympathy and bong hits. I think he'd just wanted someone to talk to.

Cam, and the stoners who lived on the house's living room couches, eventually got sick of Ben, though, his pig shitting all over, the stink of the shit, and especially we'd had enough of Ben's crazy outbursts and threats of self-harm. A council convened and unanimously decreed he be kicked out of the house; even Cam voted him out, had had enough of the suicide threats and stinky pig shits.

Ben whimpered and cried like a bitch after being given his eviction orders. He threatened to kill himself and ran upstairs way faster than a man of his size should be able to. Then he slammed his door and locked himself in his room. We thought he'd kill himself, for real, but no one cared that much because everyone had tired of his drama. Stella didn't even knock on the door, or go try to console him, or intervene on his behalf. Instead she spent the night getting fucked by a couple different dudes.

The next day, Ben left, willingly, taking his pig and everything, packed up his stuff in his old wood-paneled beater and peeled out. He'd left stone-faced, without incident, probably barreling off to wherever the fuck his creepy ass had come from.

A couple weeks later, vice cops and a SWAT team raided, machine guns drawn, and ransacked the townhouse, took everyone to jail. Stella broke down crying and snitched on everyone.

Cam spent a couple days in the county jail, where he wound up punching out a toothless crackhead who'd tried to scare Cam into trading Cam's fresh Nikes for the bum's ratty old shoes.

Cam took the fall for the drugs found in the house, the felony distribution charges. Everyone else there was charged with lesser "constructive" possession charges. After being released on bail, Cam spent \$15,000 in cash to hire a hotshot lawyer and got off with only probation, fines, and community service.

The lawyer was able to get some evidence thrown out on a technicality but had told Cam his case was tough and would've been easier if Cam'd raped a 10-year-old girl. For real. That was, verbatim, what the lawyer said.

Cam was convinced that Ben snitched him out. Especially since the cops told him there'd been an informant who'd stated that Cam "loved" selling LSD to schoolkids. That he sought out children to sell to drugs to. That he'd hang around playgrounds, in a trench coat, full of drugs, like a drug-dealing bogeyman. That Cam'd lurk outside elementary schools, waiting for kids to come along so he could sell the kids acid and maybe molest them too.

Cam believed that was exactly the bullshit Ben would make up, and Cam drunkenly talked of hiring someone to shoot Ben, the "fat piece of shit," outside his workplace, the funeral home.

Later Cam claimed he paid off an ex-hooker with HIV (who he'd met at an NA meeting) to fuck Ben without a condom. But again, this was over several beers and might have been drunk talk. Cam had his demons.

And Cam's demons worsened, continued to claw away at him. After his legal issues were resolved, he had a botched dental operation that resulted in his jaw having chronic, debilitating pain. He tried unsuccessfully to sue the dentist.

Then for a time he said he'd thought of wearing a bulletproof vest and storming into the dentist's office with an M-16, shooting everyone. Or maybe at least picketing out front of the dentist's office with a big sign, telling everyone in the world what the dentist did to him.

Cam had moved back into his parents' house. He'd gotten strung out on crack, was smoking it daily, and he was living down in his parents' basement, playing video games most of the time.

I'd gone by there to visit him, see how he was. My bros and I had been growing increasingly concerned about him, seeing as he was smoking massive amounts of crack. A lot of people had quit talking to him anyway, after his house got raided and since he'd quit selling drugs.

Stepping down the winding staircase, into that dark basement to see him, I found him looking like shit. He'd lost a ton of weight. He was skinny, pale, and paranoid,

thinking the cops might be back at any time. He'd also been complaining of that dentist. Complaining about the pain in his jaw, how he'd lost his sense of taste and couldn't sleep. He'd also again talked of how he was thinking of shooting the dentist and everyone in the office.

He'd gotten armed too. Not only did he have an M-16, he had several handguns, one of which he was holding and cleaning as we talked.

Not paying attention to what he was doing, he accidentally squeezed the gun's trigger, and it fired, a bullet whizzing by my head, only a foot or so away, leaving a cloud of smoke and a bullet hole in his basement room's wood-paneled wall.

The sound was deafening too, the gunshot. My ears rang like never before. I could barely hear anything. For a second, I thought the gunshot came from outside. It could have Ben, the cops, another drug dealer, I didn't know, but I ducked down, covered my head, then glanced up at Cam, who was holding the gun with a shocked look on his face.

It then dawned on me. This dude damn near shot me.

Cam broke into tears, apologizing, saying he'd understand if I never wanted to talk with him again. He said how if he'd shot me, he'd have shot himself immediately afterwards.

My ears ringing, I'd been drinking, and had taken valium, so I was too fucked up and stunned to process what had happened, for a minute or two, but I instantly forgave the guy. He'd been a true friend to me, had helped me when I needed help, had given me a place to stay when my mom was screaming at me, upset that I wasn't a normal human being, and I had nowhere else to go.

It was an accident. I realized that. And coming that close to death was a wake up call for me. I decided to cool out on the hard drugs, find a better path. The gunshot, the reality and thunderclap of it, its destructive power, augured to where my life was headed, and it wasn't the path I wanted...

It was a watershed moment for him, too, that incident, in that right after, he quit smoking crack. Things continued to go downhill for him, though. His girlfriend of many years dumped him. He struggled to find work. He became increasingly depressed and stopped returning friends' phone calls.

Eventually, he disappeared to a beach house he'd inherited from an uncle, up in the Panhandle, which, uncoincidentally, I think, was too far for any of his bros to easily visit. Like me, a few of his other friends would go by his parents' house to check on him after he'd stopped returning calls, but once he'd moved to the Panhandle, hardly anyone saw him anymore...

(I lost touch with Cam for almost two decades, but received a strange email from him, saying how I was his best friend, and that he loved me, and he left me a number to call. When I called, he was distraught. I could hear him wiping away tears. His voice was straining, and he was saying he'd turned 40, was still living in his parents' house, and that he'd developed diabetes, that he'd almost died after fainting in a pharmacy, that his leg might need to be amputated.)

((He also spoke of his sister. He said his sister, who was once an extremely attractive girl, a knockout blond, had blown up, gained over 100 pounds, and that he suspected her of poisoning his food.))

((((There wasn't much I could say to him, other than lending a sympathetic ear, and suggesting, politely, that he explore options of another place to live, a "professional" to talk with. I told him I'd meet him for a beer.)))

(((((However, he didn't answer my follow-up call and didn't return my ensuing calls or texts. I don't know what happened to him, but he fit the cautionary tale of the drug user in high school who winds up at 40 something living in his parents' basement, taking bong hits.))))

(((((A teacher in high school, Mr. Maroni, the MacGyver lookalike, once pulled me aside, warned me about smoking weed, winding up a stoner loser, said he had a friend like that. I brushed it off, with typical teenage bravado, arrogance, but, in retrospect, he was sort of right. Though in Cam's case, I'm not certain how much of his issues were due to drugs and how much related to mental illness. I'd bet, though, they were interrelated...))))

Back to high school, after Cam's house was raided, I worried I might be next.

(I was almost there that night of the police raid, and if it hadn't been for a weed buyer calling me and me deciding at the last minute not to go over to Cam's house, I'd have been there when the cops showed up.)

((I'll never forget waking up the next morning, seeing like over 100 messages on my pager from a friend. Fortunately, at the time of the raid, he'd been out buying cigarettes, and as he was walking back, he witnessed the cavalcade of police vehicles streaming in and armed cops in ski masks jumping out, brandishing automatic weapons and storming the house. When I called him back, talked to him the next morning, I was shocked to learn what happened, of course, but relieved, for him, that he'd walked off, left the scene unmolested, and I was thankful he'd paged me like 100 times to let me know what happened and warn me not to show up there...))

However, although I'd lucked out, not been there that night, I suspected that if Ben told on Cam, he'd probably told on me too (even though I wasn't on the committee that ousted him from the house). Still, I thought I might be next, so I emptied out my supplies, contraband, sold off everything, and only held a small amount of the chronic for personal use.

And fortunately, too, at this point, I'd laid off the coke, and didn't have any other hard drugs, wasn't doing any of those, or holding any...

Back to that day at school, I remember arriving to school, still groggy because it was too early in the morning, even though I'd ditched 1st period, as usual, so I could sleep in. Like I said before, when I walked towards the front door of the school, several security guards bumrushed me, poured out from the doors, and swarmed around me like buzzing hornets and escorted me to the principal's office.

Once there, I refused to be searched, feigning ignorance about the whole thing, but then the fucking cops showed up, claiming "probable cause." I was told by the cops that this was due to those friends who'd been caught smoking a joint on the football field and that the police suspected I was also involved in the school's drug trade.

The cops weren't relenting, were going to search me, one way or another, and I knew my back was to the wall. I knew, too, after watching Perry Mason, and Court TV, that if I gave up my weed I'd get a lesser sentence. I wasn't going to tell them where I got it, though.

So I surrendered, fished from my L.A. Raiders starter jacket a dime-bag of kind bud, and a pager.

The cops then went to search my car and found an old hunting knife I'd gotten as a gift from a friend. I'd forgotten I'd even had it.

The cops, security guards, and soon enough the school principal, the ape with his receding hairline, simian skull, dick breath and ill-fitting gray suit, were all truly incensed about that hunting knife. Usually when they found a knife on a kid, they'd zap a xerox copy of it for evidence, but the knife was too big to copy, and so they had to make TWO copies of it. They pointedly enlightened me of this.

One of the security guards, a pudgy old fellow with a walrus mustache, sloped forehead, and u-shaped balding ring of gray hair, told me dramatically that it's a good thing I wasn't angry or I might have stabbed someone with that knife. His scowling, contorted facial expression and narrowed eyes conveyed a potent mixture of anger and condemnation.

However, the funny thing was, and I smirkingly told them this, that the knife was an antique. That it was rickety, and the blade was so dull it could barely cut butter. Inspecting the knife, touching the blade, the walrus face security guard, of course, realized this, and was unable to hide a most disappointed expression.

I was then led out of the school in handcuffs.

(Crazy enough, right before I got busted, I'd been going to class more, except for first period, which was too early for me, and I had stopped snorting coke, doing hard drugs, after Cam's house being raided and him almost shooting me, as well as possibly having a cocaine overdose- I'd been on a three- or four-day coke binge, had looked at myself in the mirror and saw my nostrils caked in white crystals. Then my nose began to bleed, and I collapsed to the floor of my bathroom, crawled to my bedroom, and passed out. Slept for over 48 hours. I believe I was in a coma, possibly, but I can't say for sure.)

We, my football field smoking friends and me, were brought to police headquarters, and booked, fingerprinted, and placed, alone, in a set of what looked like stereotypical police interrogation rooms, where we were handcuffed to tables. The cops had taken our shoes because they claimed we could maybe

use the shoes to commit suicide, choke ourselves with the laces. It was hard to imagine making an effective noose from shoelaces but who knows...

Later my mom picked me up from the police headquarters. Enraged, cheeks quivering and screaming invective at me, again imploring me to be a “normal human being,” she said I was grounded forever, but she had to go to work later, and I went out anyway, smoked weed that night with a friend.

I was suspended from school, pending an expulsion hearing, and only a week after my first arrest, I awoke, at five a.m., to my doorknob rattling and frantically turning like it was possessed by a poltergeist.

Then there was banging on the door. An accusatory voice bellowed that it was “the police and we’ll kick down the door if you don’t open it.” I’d been sleeping in my stepsister’s old room, and the door was locked.

At first, I didn’t believe it was the cops. I thought it might be a rival drug dealer, a robber, or thugs. But I could hear walkie-talkies, and so I knew it likely was actual law enforcement out there. And, of course, I’d rocked to the classic Ice-T song, “6 ‘N the Mornin’,” so I knew that this was the normal time they’d show up for housecalls.

I opened the door, raised my arms in the air, and they stormed in, with guns drawn. It was the fucking ATF, the cops and Feds and a SWAT team.

Seeing a half-naked, pathetic teen must have been a major letdown for those adrenaline junkies. When they saw how pathetic I was, they let up, too, and grumbled, had a real look of disappointment.

Seems the coppers had been tipped off that I was part of a gang, because one of my friends was friends with a gangbanger, and that gangbanger had been in big trouble and turned State, supplied the cops a ton of names. Somehow this deserved a search warrant. And somehow the cops and a judge were stupid enough to believe a kid in the suburbs, selling small amounts of coke and weed, was in a street gang.

They were rather disappointed not to find much of anything, except a bong, seeds and stems. They tore apart my rooms, flipping over everything, flinging clothes, ripping up papers, tearing pages out of my books, and generally leaving the rooms

looking like a tornado had hit. However, the idiots didn't find my secret stash spot that did have a nice little baggie of sticky buds. I'm surprised they didn't bring any drug-sniffing pig dogs.

Not finding anything didn't preclude them from making the experience as dramatic as possible.

When they entered my bedroom, they saw a BB gun, and believed it to be a real gun. One cop yelling out, "He has an AK in here! He was gonna blow us all away!" To which I chuckled, assured them it was an air gun, and upon closer inspection, he realized it was, and his mustached lip curled in disillusionment.

Another cop, checking a storage area near my bedroom, asked if he would "find any dead bodies." To which I again laughed. They found camping supplies and an old bike.

The police found nothing as nefarious as they'd expected. But still, a trio of mustache faces herded me into my kitchen and accused me of involvement in everything from gang activities to the JonBenet killing. They'd berated me and threatened that I'd spend the "rest of my life" in jail. Although after their fruitless, albeit dramatic, line of questioning, they discovered quickly that they'd been wasting their time, and I wasn't worth much more than minor drug charges.

Fuck, am I lucky, though, I'd gotten off the powder. That shit can incur far worse penalties than weed seeds, stems, and used bong. Makes me grateful Cam was smoking crack and almost shot me...

I was again brought to the same police station, had my shoes taken, was fingerprinted, and then placed in the same interrogation room and handcuffed to the same table. I again was released and smoked weed later that night.

A couple months later, I avoided trial by pleading "no contest" in either case and got probation and community service.

I can't imagine how much taxpayer money was wasted on raiding the house of a non-violent drug user, drug seller.

Not like I'm the first. It's another example in a tragically long line of innocent people not allowed control over their bodies, told which drugs (tobacco, alcohol,

prescriptions) they're able to use and which ones they aren't. Fascism, as far as I'm concerned.

The cops could have easily sent a car by my house, had a cop or two question me. There was no use at all for such a spectacle. There was no use or purpose to terrify me, my mother, or to destroy my property, trashing my rooms, tearing apart my books like they did.

Plus, before that, after my first arrest, before it even, I'd cleaned up, was only smoking weed, drinking occasionally, was going to school again.

Not that I believe that teens should do drugs, any drugs, even weed. Looking back on it, I wish I didn't do it. I wish I had been on the straight and narrow. Done better in school. Maybe I'd have had a better life later. Maybe not. Like with the abortion, it's a big "what if..." and I wonder what could have been, where another path could have led...

But really, save for smoking weed, even after my second arrest, I cleaned up, did no hard drugs. And why? Because I didn't want to anymore. I'd had my fill. That's, at the end of the day, the best, most effective way for anyone to quit anything. Because they want to quit. Intrinsically.

I'm fortunate, too, in a sense, that I got my hard-drug-phase out of my system when I was young. As an older person, with an older body and older person responsibilities, like a job, kids, a mortgage, taxes and all that, getting fucked on coke or meth or PCP, having your house raided by the cops, that's got far worse consequences...

Besides community service (spent working in a soup kitchen, scrubbing toilets) I was also expelled from the program for fuckups, elevated to a "Level Five" school, a place for extreme fuckups. And that school was extremely fucked up.

26

The school for extreme fuckups was small, like the Quaker school, with around fifty to sixty students. But it was far different than the Quaker place. In that it was more like a prison/mental hospital than a school.

Its student body was mostly male, and it was definitely an assortment of characters.

My first day, I recall witnessing a miscreant, a longhair rocker type, who'd run around the halls, playing air-guitar and loudly shouting Soundgarden songs. He was leaping and headbanging until he was chased down by security guards and bundled into an isolation room to calm down.

In the isolation room he continued his psychic concert, his musical performance, flailing manically, kicking, fist-pumping and strutting, rocking out until he ran out of steam and was then safely released back into the school's general population.

I remember there was another kid, a slim and wiry fellow, with a body like a snake and a shaved head so shiny you could see light bounce off it. He'd been an aspiring Olympic gymnast before his career as a delinquent. Just for fun, he'd creep outside, during class, and start running laps around the building. Then he'd laugh when the security guards, who were mostly obese, middle-aged men, would have to come out there, and, huffing and puffing, the pathetic guards would fecklessly chase him around the building, in circles, like a Warner Brothers cartoon.

Every so often he'd, somehow, climb up to the top of the building (it was a one story, long, rectangular structure) and he'd sit up there on the roof, while the security guards and teachers would yell at him to come down, threatening to call the police or fire department.

Then he'd backflip down from the roof, landing perfectly on his feet every time, and surrender, walk back in, without any problems, and serve detention or time in the isolation room. There he'd sit quietly, cross-legged with his eyes pressed shut and his head thrown back, meditating or something like a Buddhist monk.

The head security guard, a former vice cop, a muscular, Jon Jones looking guy, shaved head and all, was in charge of collecting drug tests. Everyone in the school, even students who'd never been in trouble with substance abuse or possession, sales, everyone, to a boy or girl, had to piss in a cup at random intervals.

There was a kid, a total weirdo, with headgear braces, who probably never touched a drug in his life. One morning he was chosen to be drug tested, and he pitched a hysterical fit, a shrieking tantrum...

The weirdo was really fucking weird. We called him Ravioli because he constantly talked of ravioli, like every day, anytime you saw him, he'd be ranting about ravioli, about cooking it, eating it. Also, he'd talk about stealing it. Stealing frozen ravioli. The kid had landed in that school because he regularly skipped school to steal things from stores. It was his thing, stealing from convenience stores, grocery stores, frozen things, especially. He bragged that he'd once stolen a whole chicken. (Not a live one, a frozen one.)

The Jon Jones security boss cornered Ravioli, in the hallway, during a break between classes, and told him, menacingly, like he'd tell everyone else, that it was his time to "give," his chosen euphemism for pissing in a cup...

Ravioli exploded into histrionics, freaking out, his eyes shining with tears, saying how he couldn't do it, he couldn't piss in the cup. And he fell to the hallway floor, rolling around, slapping at the cold white linoleum, weeping and shrieking and convulsing...

I don't know how they eventually got Ravioli's piss, but I'm sure they did. The Jon Jones guy'd stalk students relentlessly, following them with a small lidded plastic cup, hounding them to "give." Guy was like the Javert of piss. He knew that sooner or later the kids would piss, and he'd be there when they did...

We had these group therapy meetings that Jon Jones dude would head. Along with a counselor/teacher, a pretty, young, but terribly skinny blond, who'd tell stories of her bulimia.

In the group therapy, there'd be "positives" given for those who'd behaved well, gotten good grades, and "negatives" given for those who'd ran afoul of school rules. There was often shouting, insults and fistfights breaking out in these meetings. As well as personal stories involving a lot of parental abuse, neglect.

But many of my classmates there didn't seem off. Most were normal, outwardly, not kids who "killed their teachers" or anything of the sort.

Most had problems with reading, though, and maybe that's where many of their issues stemmed. Because they couldn't keep up academically.

The books in the library were all at a far lower reading level than a typical high school. Most were at elementary school level, had large font, simplistic vocabulary.

In English class, we'd been asked to read one book for the term, and I found a book in the library about Magic Johnson. It was quick, easy, maybe 3rd grade level. I read it in a couple minutes and wrote a short report on it.

I remember handing the report to my teacher, a flamboyantly gay middle-aged Caribbean man (who had these huge, pointy ears, like an elf), and the teacher was so proud that I'd read the book, understood it, and had written something about it. I guess he didn't see much of that there. Mostly he broke up fights.

Since I was finished, I was allowed to return to the library and study. When I got there, I asked the librarian, a chunky Iranian lady in a baggy gray robe and matching headscarf, if she had a newspaper, like maybe The New York Times or Miami Herald or Sun Sentinel, the latter of which I read most often, and the librarian shook her head, told me no, they didn't "because those papers are at too high a reading level for the school's students."

She passed me a copy of USA Today...

On the last day of school before summer break, a couple fights broke out, which was odd, considering how happy and relaxed most students would usually be before vacation. A teacher there confided in me that it was because many of the students had rough home situations, some lived in group homes, and they'd preferred coming to school rather than staying at home all day and that a few didn't have anywhere to be, were basically homeless.

That day, one of the security guards, I'm not sure why, came into a classroom I'd been sitting in and began yelling at me about not signing my contract. I'd forgotten or simply neglected to do it that day. I can't remember.

(Every day when we arrived at school, we'd sign a behavior "contract" spelling out the rules we were to follow. At the close of the school day we'd have it signed by

a teacher to demonstrate we'd abided by the rules. If it wasn't signed, we'd be in trouble, lose privileges...)

I laughed off the security guard's ire because it didn't seem like a thing to be so angry about. There was no need to raise his voice, and I told him so, but didn't curse or yell at him. However, the guy lost his cool, flipped out, cursed at me and tried to grab my throat and strangle me!

Knowing martial arts, I broke away from him quickly, used a defensive maneuver to shove him back, and threw a few air punches and kicks in his direction, to let him know what was coming his way if he persisted. I'd planned on attacking his crotch, his nuts, and fucking maiming his manhood.

Though he was a lot bigger than me, I knew exactly the moves to take him down; him being as slovenly and obese as he was, it probably would have ended poorly for him; or me, who knows, not like I'm Chuck Norris...

He backed off, though, left the room in a huff. I'm sure he was simply burned out from dealing with little shits headbanging in the hallways, having to break up fights, and chasing backflipping gymnasts around the building and off the roof.

Poor bastard.

I could have gotten him fired, probably, for putting his hands on me, and probably should have. But, in truth, I pitied him. Felt bad he had such a thankless, grueling job.

And instead of staying in that hellhole, I pursued a more fruitful path. I left that school and was extremely fortunate to attend another small private school, where my friend Taylor went, and had a chill year, in a chill school, smoking weed every day at lunch, with Taylor, and still maintaining an "A" average, for my senior year.

Sadly, due to my prior fucking up, ditching school, my credits were short and precluded me from graduation. I was invited to return to that small chill school, to do a fifth year of high school, but I decided against it. I didn't want to be a nineteen-year-old with a bunch of fourteen-year-old freshmen. I was tired of high school, too. I wanted to do something else, go on to college.

Since I'd not graduated high school, I couldn't go anywhere, though, except enroll in limited courses at a community college. A place Chris Rock so eloquently calls "a disco with books."

While taking a couple courses at community college, I studied for my GED. And I passed the test, easily, that fall, and was able to still graduate high school in the same year as my peers, albeit in the fall instead of summer.

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It was around this time that I got back into hard rock, influenced by the new wave of rock at the time, Marilyn Manson, Nine Inch Nails, Rammstein, and Korn. And in a way, it was like returning home.

Which leads back to me being a younger kid, when I was huge into "hair" metal.

Metal and rap, mostly hardcore rap, were always my favorite genres, as I previously discussed, but for a time, I was consumed by metal...

At around age 10, I'd gotten cable TV and discovered MTV.

The first video I ever saw was Whitesnake's "Here I Go Again."

I'll never forget seeing that video. I was transfixed. I stood mesmerized in front of the living room TV, with my jaw hitting the floor. Those guys were, to me, at the time, the fucking coolest thing I'd ever seen. The way they played and held their instruments. Their attitude. Their clothes. The leather pants and jackets. The big hair. The singer and how he carried the mic, held it like a beautiful woman he was about to kiss.

And of course, there was a beautiful woman in that video. Tawny Kitaen. The vixen. In the prime of her looks. Tawny the blazing-hot redhead dancing like a stripper, doing splits on the hood of a Jaguar... Tawny with red hair of fire. Tawny's goddess moves and gyrations... I'd never seen a woman who looked or moved like her...

And the music. The music! The fucking keyboard intro. Three dudes, side by side, guitars slung over their backs, playing that epic keyboard intro. Those iconic synths leading into the catchy, thrilling riffs and melodically kindling vocals that

burst into a singalong chorus and then into a searing crescendo of howls... The lyrics' listlessly hopeless yet doggedly defiant celebration of perseverance, idealism, and individualism... Oh my God! It was revelation! Hearing the song for the first time was as if my ears were having tantric orgasms... I remember the hair standing up on my arms and neck, chills jolting up my spine. It was like I'd opened my eyes for the first time. It was euphoric.

Everything conceivable about the video was awesome. Seeing that, I knew what I wanted to be in life. A fucking rock star.

Growing up, I'd watch MTV compulsively. I was hooked. I especially was into the "Headbanger's Ball" and all those metal bands of the 1980s and early 1990s. I loved them all. And still do.

Whitesnake. Ratt. Poison. Warrant.

(I saw an interview, not long ago, with Jani Lane, the lead singer of Warrant, and he expressed his disdain for his classic: "Cherry Pie." He said he'd been forced by his label to write the song and how he hated being associated with it. Fuck that. That song rocked. Those guys rocked. They played jam-packed arenas, banged superhot chicks, made tons of cash, lived out their dreams and brought joy to millions. Jani FUCKING rocked. If he were alive, I'd give him a hug and thank him for providing us with such awesome tunes. RIP, dude.)

All those bands rocked. L.A. Guns, Guns N' Roses. Def Leppard. Motley Crue, though, was my favorite. I loved them. I loved all that shit. And still do. Fuck anyone who has a problem with it!

While I didn't listen to a whole lot of hard rock or metal for a while (save for White Zombie, which Jessica liked and got me into) around my senior year of high school and first year of community college, I got back into it, hard. I'd very much been inspired by Marilyn Manson and his masterpiece "Antichrist Superstar."

I bought a new guitar, a knockoff Fender Stratocaster and cheap old Peavey bass guitar and started playing again, hoping to resurrect and fulfil my abandoned rock star dreams.

Unfortunately, it didn't happen. I didn't realize those dreams. I walked along the lonely street of dreams unfulfilled. Like in Chuck Palahniuk's opus book, which

was adapted into the all-time classic film, “Fight Club,” there was a line I’ll paraphrase about how we all grew up watching TV, thinking we’d be rock stars, movie stars, and we’re not, and we’re pissed off about it.

I’m still sort of pissed off about not being a rock star. But not for the obvious reasons. The real story, the real reason is different. Much different.

28

It was at this time, when I was in community college, that I’d answered an ad for a band seeking a bassist, a handwritten band ad I found hanging on a wall in one of the college’s bathrooms.

The band ad mentioned similar tastes as I had, 80s rock, metal, that type of sound, so I decided to throw my hat in the ring, see if I could join their cause.

When I got to the audition, the singer/guitarist, Cyrus, had a tight-looking setup going.

Cyrus lived with his folks, and their house was pretty spacious, not a mansion, but big, with plenty of room for the band to rehearse. In his basement, he had a spiffy little makeshift home studio equipped with an 8-track recording module and a wide assortment of pedals, amps, drum kit, and tech gadgets.

Cyrus’s dad, who looked sort of like a leprechaun, short, Irish, with flaming red hair and flush red cheeks, had a successful home renovation business, and bred horses. They lived well outside Miami, past West Palm Beach, and had a tiny farm, stable, riding track, next to their house, with a few horses they rode, bred, and sold.

Cyrus introduced his dad as the group’s manager.

Manager? I was impressed. It sounded so professional! So serious! So adult! I’d never been in a band with a manager. I’d only played in shitty garage bands, mostly with rich pothead kids in high school.

The whole having a manager thing was a new world to me. Plus, his band was playing shows. Lots of shows, they’d said. At local bars, restaurants.

The band played mostly originals too, that Cyrus wrote. They were catchy tunes, got stuck in your head, his riffs and hooks. Very 80s rock, hair metal, mid-tempo vibe. Cyrus was an excellent guitarist, could rip fantastic solos, and really did have premium gear, Ibanez axes, pro-quality EQs, amps, speakers.

His singing was a tad freaky, though. I was never a big fan of it. Sounded like a constipated Dave Mustaine crossed with Neil Young on a bad acid trip.

But his tunes, guitar-playing were enough, for me, to look past it. He'd had singers before but had wanted to handle the vocal duties himself because singers often left the group, completely changing the sound, ala Van Halen, Black Sabbath, to name a few, so he wanted to maintain the group's style, dynamic.

(It wouldn't be until later that I discovered why so many left his group...)

The drummer of the band, Chris, was slightly older than us, and was a stocky, hairy Italian American guy, with dark features, who, in his late 20s, lived at home with his parents. He drove a white corvette, I remember, and was the manager of a grocery store.

Chris and I never connected. Usually bassists and drummers should be tight, forming the rhythm section, the backbone, the spine of the band, but it wasn't so with him. From the beginning, he didn't like anything about me, the way I moved, played, dressed, nothing.

(Can't say I'd like him much, either. I found him sort of a douche bag. He'd speak openly about having a bathroom fetish with women. Not that I care much what people do in their private lives, but that's one I'm not sure should be shared with people you barely know. Like, maybe, pass me a questionnaire first, dude...)

During my bass solos he'd purposely hit his drums louder in an attempt to drown me out. He also complained to Cyrus about me.

But Cyrus, and I, weren't entirely happy with him either. He'd be off tempo, at times, and was flaky, missing practices, and then got involved with this girl who he seemed more into than the band.

Cyrus and I had become close friends, hanging outside the band, drinking, smoking, talking on the phone. We'd talk for hours about rock. He was into all the same bands and was a hair metal historian like me. He'd been a bro, too, and

introduced me to his girlfriend's little sister, who I started to casually date. And she was one smoking hot little Cuban number!

Tiring of Chris, we began auditioning other drummers, one of them being a police officer, at least ten years older than us. But we decided against him since he could bust us for weed and once threaten that he'd have to bust anyone he saw doing drugs at a concert. That was going way too far. That wasn't rock and roll.

We also experimented with using a drum machine, but it wasn't the same as having a live drummer.

Ultimately, we stuck with Chris, and I saw why he didn't want to leave. While bowling, with our girlfriends, Chris brought up something about us getting a record deal.

I asked Cyrus about this, and he told me that his dad "knew people" in the music business and that they were interested in signing us to a major label record deal.

Here I was, joining this band, and so far, we played only a couple shows at tiny bars, but it looked like we had the chance to get a "deal" and maybe make it big. Of course, being young, I didn't understand the music business, so any talk of a record deal, to me, equated instant fame.

We started playing more shows at local bars. Some were packed and went off well. We'd have the place erupting in cheers and headbanging, playing covers of 80s metal songs and Cyrus's originals. We'd bring down the house, on certain nights. There were other nights, too, when we played to five people. Sure, it was better to play a raucous, packed bar, but as long as we played, and played loud, we had fun. We just loved to play. We loved rock and roll...

Here and there we'd play restaurants, which was always a hit or miss. There'd be families there eating, and upon hearing Judas Priest covers, they'd up and leave rather quickly. (But once a family's five-year-old son was dancing around and rocking to us, which made my night!)

There was another band we connected with, befriended, at an open mic night, and we started playing shows with them; they had a small local following and played mostly alternative covers of the day, Green Day, "Sex and Candy," Third Eye Blind. But, strangely, their friends, fans, liked us too.

Out of the several shows we did with them, most came off well, until later, when the guitarist of that band and the singer started to argue a lot, getting into a fistfight on stage one night. Which, to be honest, was the highlight of the show.

Shortly we were joined by an electric violinist, a tall, lanky Haitian fellow, who absolutely rocked. He and Cyrus played dueling solos to GNR cover songs. It was dazzling.

But things unraveled, and fast.

There was to be a big rock festival up in Polk County, with L.A. Guns (or at least an iteration of L.A. Guns) and we were to open for them. Holy shit! We would be opening for a band, well, at least three members of the original band, but still, a band I grew up loving and to this day love. "Rip and Tear," "Electric Gypsy," their first two records, through and through 80s metal classics!

It somehow fell through, with Cyrus saying we'd have to be on a side stage, near a pile of pig shit. Which, I must say, was okay with me. I'd have stood IN pig shit if it meant playing on the same bill as L.A. Guns. Hell, even if it was only ONE original member of L.A. Guns- preferably Traci Guns- but who-the-fuck-ever!

Anyways, Cyrus didn't want to do it, which puzzled me. Why give up any opportunity to rock with a band that legendary?

Cyrus said there was to be a bigger gig later. But before that, at a bar gig we played, Cyrus got bitched out by the bar owner because Cyrus had stood up on a speaker and jumped from it, doing a flying air kick, during a guitar solo.

Apparently, the bar owner had warned him not to jump off anything, wary of lawsuits, I guess. But Cyrus did it anyway.

Afterwards, we got into a heated argument with the bar owner. The angry bald New York guy cursing us out, his every other word being "fuck" or "fucking" and he fucking banned us from the fucking bar. Then after we were ejected from the premises, we had another flare-up. This one with a creepy little cock-eyed security guard, a guy with a probable Napoleon complex. Napoleon didn't like us standing outside the bar, smoking and talking. Cyrus's dad, not a large man himself, and Napoleon nearly got into a physical altercation, which we had to break apart.

Collecting our things, we left in a hurry.

The next night, we drove out to Vero Beach, a somewhat long haul up the coast, to play an 80s rock bar, where we'd been promised a gig. Entering the place, it was like a time warp. Dudes with big hair, tight leather pants.

But, and I don't know why, there was no gig. Driving back home, we stopped for a late-night dinner, at a redneck diner. Over pancakes, Cyrus bragged about an upcoming show, where there'd be a record label executive or two to see us play.

Cyrus said the label had been waiting for hard rock "to come back" before they could sign us and were hoping for the right time to release our debut album.

Cyrus continued going on about the record label, the deal we'd sign, the things he'd request in the record contract, like unlimited supplies of Marlboro cigs and cases of ice-cold coca colas available at any time.

His dad shushed him, said "Cyrus!" in a castigating way, as if he knew something.

We didn't have any other gigs for a couple weeks, and during this time, this run-up to the "big" gig where the record executive would be present, the gig got talked up more and more by Cyrus, and his dad also. His dad telling us after practice that there'd be "very important" people there, although, when he said this, his eyes were fixed to the floor and he'd spoken in a wavering voice, like he didn't believe it, which struck me as odd...

Cyrus said the place would be the biggest venue we'd ever played. That there'd be around five hundred people. Cyrus and I plastered fliers for the gig, too, around town, local schools, hang out spots.

Crazy enough, at my community college, where I plastered fliers, the next day I got to school, someone had torn them all down. Every single one!

It turned out to be a former bassist in the band, who'd now wanted to fight Cyrus. The guy had left Cyrus an angry voicemail saying he'd torn down the fliers and would kick Cyrus's ass.

Cyrus said it was because he had stolen the dude's girlfriend and kicked him out of the band. (Although later I suspected otherwise.)

I asked Cyrus if he feared the guy, because he sounded totally nuts on the phone, and Cyrus was a scrawny, short guy (who sort of looked like a cross between Tom Petty, a Florida Cracker, and a leprechaun). Cyrus said that he wasn't afraid, because his dad had taught him "Star," a secret Israeli form of martial arts.

Getting to our big show that night, I was excited as I'd ever been. I expected a huge crowd, though was kinda scared for Cyrus, scared that freak ex-bassist might show up with a gun or at least kick Cyrus's ass. I wasn't convinced of Cyrus's proficiency in Israeli martial arts, "Star" or whatever, but who knows. There'd be bouncers at the bar, I figured.

Arriving at the bar, I was massively disappointed. There was nowhere near five hundred people.

The place was more of a pool hall, and the crowd, of maybe fifty or so scattered folks, weren't interested at all in our music.

Cyrus's dad, our manager, sensing the apathy, ran over to us, after only our first or second song, and pushed us to play our strongest song, our closer, "Paradise City" by Guns N' Roses, but that didn't garner more than an awkward stare or two.

We finished our set early and left. I was unspeakably disappointed but managed to ask Cyrus if the record executive had shown up. He told me that he'd been there and was a fat guy in a fancy suit, with a long-braided ponytail and an attractive lady in a black dress at his side.

I wondered why I hadn't noticed a character that conspicuous. Why it was that the guy hadn't stopped to say hello or talked with Cyrus's dad. Surely he'd have wanted to have a few words if he'd been there to scout us.

A week later we played a pizza parlor we'd played a few times before, in front of five or six people, and a guy, who looked like one of my community college professors, a fiftyish, wiry, bearded, tweed jacket, corduroy pants wearing gentleman (who just looked like a college professor, like he smoked a pipe and performed, or at least read, Shakespeare) had a word with Cyrus's dad.

Cyrus told me the guy was from a local independent label and that he was interested in signing us to a deal.

With the guy not too far away, I blurted out, “Why would we sign with an independent label if a major label wants to sign us?”

The guy overheard us and gave us a funny look.

A few days later, I asked Cyrus about it, if anything came from the local record label, and he said we hadn’t heard back from him yet.

Cyrus also said the major label that wanted us couldn’t sign us because we weren’t yet twenty-one, and they couldn’t sign anyone under twenty-one.

That sounded fishy to me, especially seeing all the popular boy bands of the day, who were likely younger than us.

Then Cyrus, a couple days later, showed his hand. In the car, coming back from an Aerosmith concert we’d gone to, with a couple girls, he, drunkenly, let slip something about how we needed to tell our drummer that there’d be another record label wanting to sign us.

I asked if it was true. Cyrus said no. I asked why we’d tell him that. Cyrus replied, saying that we needed to make it “sound like more things are going on so people won’t leave.”

That, immediately, didn’t sit well with me. I saw floaters for a second. My stomach sank. Then I told him, angrily, only the lowest piece of shit in the world would lie about record deals, such things, and that I hoped he was joking. We were both drunk, and I thought maybe he was kidding. He laughed nervously and probably forgot about it by the next day. But I didn’t. I wasn’t that drunk.

So I told a friend, a dude I’d gone to high school with, about the situation.

The guy had gotten a huge settlement, shit-ton of cash from an airline after his parents died in a plane crash and was living between New York and Miami. I scored weed from him, occasionally, as he’d been buying seriously chronic weed. Shit from the same guy who sold weed to Quentin Tarantino. It was, as you’d expect, killer bud, the Tarantino weed. And my friend had even met Tarantino, once, at a party, and ripped bong hits with him.

That friend, Anthony, because of the NYC party circles he ran in, knew a couple people from Jive Records, and talked to them about the whole thing, and the Jive

guys said it was bullshit. There was no minimum age for signing artists. Also, if they'd wanted to sign a group or singer, they'd just sign them, before anyone else could.

Even worse, too, was that Jive was one of the major labels that Cyrus said before were "interested" in signing him. He also said he'd worked as a songwriter for them, sold a few tunes to them.

But that also wasn't the case. The Jive guys had never heard of Cyrus. He'd made the whole thing up.

The way he told it, too, was so convincing. It made me wonder if he really believed it. Was he mentally ill? Or a pathological liar? Or was it that maybe he'd missed his true calling, as an actor? Isn't that what an actor is, anyway, a very effective liar?

After receiving the news from my pal, a haze of heat ran up my neck. I was devastated and immediately decided to quit the band, cut ties with Cyrus. I didn't call Cyrus, either, just hopped in my car and went by Cyrus's house, got my gear, but didn't say much to him.

As I was lifting my bass and amp into the trunk of my car, he asked, sheepishly, if I'd be bringing back the gear.

I slapped the trunk shut and replied, sternly, that my friend talked to Jive. They had no rules about being twenty-one to sign a deal. He then got angry at me; said I shouldn't have asked about it, implying it was my fault.

His attempt to shift the blame for the situation enraged me. For a split second, I was about to deck him, see how well he really knew Israeli martial arts. But, my anger again subsided into more of a hurt, a disappointment. He was a bro, or I thought he was. Finding him to be so full of shit was a terrible stab in the back.

My face tightened and I asked him if he thought I was retarded or something like that.

(This was before that was a slur.)

He said no, and he took a step back, his brows furrowed, and lips pursed. My voice raised, but not straining, I pointedly disclosed that my friend knew people at

Jive and that my friend asked if Cyrus had been a songwriter for them or if they were interested in signing us, and that Jive said neither were true. They'd never even heard of him or us.

I told Cyrus he was either living in a fantasy world, had mental problems, or was a total lying sack of shit.

He stood frozen, staring at me, his jaw dangling. He had no response. I'm not sure anyone had called him out or exposed him like that, but I imagine that perhaps a similar tale was why the previous bassist and others had left. It probably was the reason the bassist had wanted to kick Cyrus's ass.

I got in my car and drove off. I had to pull over, though, because I began hyperventilating. I was so amped up. My heart beating so fast and hard it battered my ribcage.

It was a combination of anger, sadness. I mean, basically he and his dad had been using my childhood dream and youthful naïveté to manipulate me, fool me into believing a fairytale.

What's worse about it, was that I did in fact know people who knew people. Had Cyrus not lied, we could have had my friend from NYC bring people to see us, actually have our demo heard by someone.

Maybe it would have worked. Maybe it wouldn't have. Maybe we'd have gotten a deal and never gone anywhere. Our style of music had died, commercially, by that time, the late 90s, but it could have been an honest shot, way better than what transpired. Worst of all, it was a stab in the back, and the loss of a person I genuinely considered a friend.

It was a tough pill to swallow.

(While I never got along with Chris, I believed he had a right to know about Cyrus's dishonesty. I didn't have his number, but I knew where he worked, and so a couple days later, I went by his grocery store. He was off that day, and I left a note for him, telling him everything. I hope he read it. But if not, I'm sure that like everyone else, he probably figured out the truth eventually...)

((Cyrus never realized his rock and roll dream. I never heard of his band playing any live shows after that, nor did I see any of his music online. Out of curiosity,

writing this book, I googled him, found him to have carried on, taken over his family's home renovation company. I don't know if he still plays guitar or not.))

Cyrus didn't make it. He didn't become a rock star. And his band didn't catapult me to fame, either...

So, yes, Mr. Chuck Palahniuk, Mr. Pitt, Mr. Norton, I'm not a rock star. But I'm not as pissed about that as I am pissed Cyrus and his asshole father lied to me and untold others. That pissed me off far, far worse. But it was an important life lesson, and taught me a thing or two about trusting people too easily...

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I didn't give up then, though, on my music dreams. I started writing my own songs. Venturing more into a pop direction. Making dance-pop tracks, heavy on synth but with growling, death metal sort of vocals. Not the best combination (but a group from Japan has recently made it work!)

I took my demos into a local recording studio, hoping to perfect them. I hired a local singer to provide vocals for a couple tracks and had a CD pressed.

The studio was the same spot where the 2 Live Crew had once recorded, and I loved walking in and seeing their platinum plaques adorning the walls in the lobby.

Unfortunately, the owner, the boss of the studio was a dick. In our initial meeting, I'd been told I could record the demos (which were already done, really only needed mastering, additional vocals) and that I could pay for the recording sessions after completion.

But once the process began, he forced me to pay daily, as I went, not making eye contact as he'd summoned me into his office, which felt like a trip to see a middle school principal. The chubby 60ish fellow, with his mop of dyed blond hair and his marshmallow body, had demanded immediate payment, looking squirrely as he spoke, and when he spoke I remember his mouth didn't move much, almost as if he were a ventriloquist and I remember how his dentures seemed a tad out of place.

Worse than suddenly having payment terms changed was that, at the end of the process, the recording studio charged me far more than I expected or was first quoted.

I suspect the studio boss had changed the terms because he thought I might rip them off. And I probably should have.

They certainly ripped me off. Overcharging me. The mastering sucked too. They placed the singer I'd hired's vocals way in front of the music, so loud the music could barely be heard.

The way they'd EQed her vocals too, made her sound like Pat Benatar. Not the sound I was after and not how she sounded in her audition.

The demo sucked. Plus, they'd overcharged me for it. I was pissed.

As a struggling college student, working part-time jobs at stores and selling occasional bags of weed to stay afloat, it hurt me financially. Wasn't a wonderful coda to what I experienced with Cyrus.

I still sent out the demo, plus other home recordings to tons of record labels, hoping to score a deal, achieve my dream.

But all I received was rejection. Rejection letters in the mail, some saying my demo had been "confidentially destroyed," which didn't make me feel much better.

With each rejection letter I received, I felt the ugly sting, stomach sinking pang of rejection. With each letter it was like I was sinking in a sea of shit. Opening the letters, excited the contents might be an acceptance, the first break on my road to stardom, I'd always tear open the envelope to find a form letter, "Thank you for your interest in..."

Glaring at the impersonal letter, the shit feeling would wash over me, and I'd be down for a day or two. But then I'd move on, ready up to send my music out to another possible warm ear.

Eventually I ran out of leads, however. Every demo I'd sent out, hundreds of them, got rejected. I realized what I was doing wasn't working. I realized that I'd failed, at least so far, in my life's quest to be a rock star.

Around this time, I saw a “Behind the Music” about Poison. Bobby Dall, their bass player, said how his goal in life was not to be a musician. It was to be a rock star. Same with me. He succeeded, though, where I failed.

(And more power to him! Because I fucking love Poison! Those guys are legends!)

I slid into a depression, popping valium, drinking, smoking more weed, and I dropped out of school and worked crappy retail jobs.

By this time, I’d moved out of my mom’s house and was living in a tiny apartment. The floor was covered in filth, empty bottles of booze.

One afternoon, I woke up from a drinking binge, scanned around the littered carpet, and said, “fuck this.”

Fuck this. So it didn’t work out. So what? Things fail. I was discovering more of the gut-punches and bumps in the road that life had in store. Truth is, in real life, you don’t always get what you want. Things don’t always end up like in the movies. You don’t always achieve your dream. You don’t always get the girl. But, what you need to do, is keep fighting, and if you get knocked down, get back up, and if you lose, at least go out swinging.

I was gonna keep swinging. Keep at it. Keep going for my dream.

I decided to get off my ass, quit feeling sorry for myself. I decided that I would continue to pursue a career in the music business.

But this time, I’d do it from the inside.... Infiltrate it from the business end, learn the ropes, and later start my own record label and pursue my own ventures.

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I decided to return to school and enter a music business program. Fortunately, I’d done well my last year of high school, aced the GED, and gotten straight A’s in community college, so I had decent options, as far as schools.

But, like many choices in life, I chose wrongly, and between a music business program in Los Angeles, and a program in Nashville, Tennessee. I chose the program in Nashville, because of two factors.

The first being that it was far less expensive, being a program at a state school. (The program in L.A. was at a private university.)

And the second factor being that it was ranked above the program in L.A., supposedly was the top music business program in the country.

While the program did have its merits, many excellent professors, many of whom had worked in the business, as well as the school having a professional quality recording studio, later I'd come to discover that it had huge drawbacks...

Outside of Nashville, it wasn't as highly regarded as it was sold, and I suspect Aunt Becky funny business or that someone was paid off for them to receive such high rankings.

The college counselor, recruiters sold the school as internationally known and as having many amenities it didn't have, like high speed internet in the dorms. Worst of all, they'd guaranteed internship placement, assistance with a major record label or entertainment company.

That also was a flat out lie. They did nothing but provide a list of names and numbers to call, many of which were out-of-date, and they did nothing to recommend us to a company or recommend a company to us.

(This was when the internet was fledgling and had very few review sites, simply didn't have the plethora of info it does now, so it was harder to know what I was diving into...)

When I did later, on my own, find a record label to intern with, the school was negligent and failed to return important paperwork to the company, nearly causing me to get fired from the internship!

But the worst part of being in Tennessee wasn't the school or incompetent administration. There are lousy, predatory, and parasitic colleges and idiot bureaucrats everywhere. Neither of those were the worst of my issues. The worst of my issues were some of the locals I had the misfortune to encounter.

Generally, people in Tennessee are quite polite, friendly, but there's also a subset of folks who are very racist, bigoted toward not just other races but also harbor antipathy towards people from outside the "South," and even towards people from south Florida, anywhere below West Palm Beach. (Florida being the only state in Ole' Dixie that becomes more "Northern" the farther south one ventures...)

These bitter Southern folks are generally the sorts who fly confederate flags. They're often people who call Blacks "niggers" and label anyone from outside the South as "yankees."

Before going to Tennessee, I'd spent little time in the South, aside from upper Florida, and Georgia, and I hadn't experienced any hostility, aside from the ginger waiter when I was a kid who'd ignored my parents and me. Other than that waiter, people I'd come across there, or people I met from there, were usually welcoming and outgoing. Sometimes surprisingly so, their smiling and small talk off-putting. Especially to me, coming from Miami, where folks can often be gruff.

I honestly had no idea how pissed off many in the South were, still, about the Civil War.

To someone from most anywhere else in America, the Civil War was an event we learned about in history class. History buffs could, I'm sure, be enthusiastic about it. But for most regular people, it's simply an event in the far past, and we're generally happy the South lost and that slavery ended as a result.

However, that's not the attitude many in the South had. Upon simply opening my mouth and talking to people, I'd instantly see their demeanor shift from one of friendliness to one of coldness. All because of my accent, which is a bland American accent, with a slight tinge of New York.

(The hatred in the South of "yankees" and Northerners, to me, rendered Trump's sweeping of the Red States wholly perplexing. For them to embrace a "damn yankee" wasn't an event I could have envisioned.)

((It surprised me then, and still does now, that people in the South had such strong emotions, hatred of "yankees." I wasn't expecting that. But I must say that I have mixed feelings about the Civil War. Though it's virtually impossible to separate it from slavery, because the South's economy was based around it, to a

large extent, plus there was racist dialogue written in their constitution. But what if you look at it from the angle of a group of people, the Southern States, voting democratically, to leave, form their own union? What is wrong with that? Isn't that democracy? Shouldn't they have the right to leave? Lincoln was ready to allow them to maintain slavery if they didn't secede. Many forget that. How different would history have been if that compromise had been reached? Maybe America wouldn't have outlawed slavery until the 1960s, like Saudi Arabia!))

I had a tough time making friends there, in Tennessee. Not only because of my own weirdness and issues, but largely because I wasn't able to fit in anywhere, being labeled a "yankee," even though I was technically from the South. A part of that, I think, too, me not belonging, or feeling as if I didn't belong, was because I'm Jewish.

There weren't many Jews down there. Most people, upon meeting me, wouldn't know what I was, and I'd be asked "Where are you from?" quite often. I was commonly mistaken for Italian, possibly due to my accent and hook nose. But once I'd share that I was Jewish, I'd often be invited to church services.

Sometimes random people, young and old, would approach me in public places, like school, a grocery store, a gas station, wherever, and invite me to church or a Christian rock show or a prayer meeting or spiritual gathering. I'd always politely decline.

Every once in a while, if I didn't feel like talking to them, I'd pretend I didn't speak English, say "Yo no hablo..." and walk away. Or, just for fun, I'd tell them, in a plainspoken, casual tone, that I worship Satan. Just to see their reaction. Most such reactions were a sudden look of bewilderment, raised eyebrows, or an awkward smirk followed by their quick departure...

Not long after I'd arrived, a worker at a BBQ joint, a tall, stocky, pot-bellied 50 or 60ish good ole' boy with a crewcut and bushy eyebrows, told me, in an assuring voice, like he was trying to sell me a car, that "You know, Jesus Christ was the best friend we ever had." He'd said this to me as he'd handed me my order of ribs, coleslaw, and cornbread.

I'm guessing he'd said this, thinking I was Jewish or Muslim or possibly gauging what spiritual beliefs I held. I'm unsure if he knew most Jews don't eat pork or how he'd feel if he knew I was a Jew who ate pork.

The BBQ there was so tasty that I didn't want to risk being tossed from the store, so I wasn't going to claim to be a Satan worshipper or disclose my true status as an agnostic. Though I wonder what he'd have said if I'd shared my opinion of Jesus being a totally rad hippie... Which I do think, for real...

Actually, I was stunned he'd even bring up dogma over spareribs. I simply smiled at him, nodded and walked to my table to chow down. I'd still go to that place, but felt slightly uncomfortable anytime I did, worried they'd try to kidnap me, throw me in a lake to Baptize me or force me into a shotgun church service...

People there, I discovered fast, were touchy about the Civil War, right wing politics, and Jesus. I learned to avoid those topics as much as possible.

Though once in one of my required English classes, we'd read a story with a spiritual theme, and I raised my hand during a class discussion. Not sure why I blurted this out, but, in an inquisitive tone, I asked the teacher: "Why is it that God is always referred to as 'He?' If there's a God, couldn't it be a woman, a 'She?'"

The teacher, a bookish, elderly Southern gentleman, in his Colonel Sanders suit, who'd begin every class the same way, simply calling roll, in his monotone Southern drawl... "Miss Ball?" "Miss Ball?" ... That old Southern gentleman stared at me like he'd seen an alien land from outer space. The room silenced.

Completely, save for a couple gasps. No one spoke for about 30 seconds. Then the teacher acted as if he hadn't heard the question, moved on and read from the story's next passage.

The rest of that term, the teacher and other students in the class did their damndest to avoid eye contact with me. Needless to say I didn't make any friends in that class. I found similarly cold shoulders, sneers, and averted eyes in most of my classes. Most of my classmates, and teachers, wanted nothing to do with me. Either ignoring me or looking at me like I was a pedophile.

I'd meet a couple cool folks, though, here and there. Eventually I fell in with a crew of hippies, who smoked weed, like me, and were chill and friendly. At first, at least.

A cute hippy chick, Amy, a saucy little brunette, with waist-length spirally hair and deep-set brown eyes, who I'd met at a bonfire near campus (where I went to find

drugs), needed a roommate for the house that she and another girl, plus a couple chubby hairy hippy guys were sharing.

I agreed to move in because the dorms at the school sucked. They were small, loud, and dirty cinderblock cells and I had to share a bathroom with ten dudes. Ten young dudes sharing a bathroom. Picture that. The stink. The horror. One can only imagine the filth, bacteria, and fungi a black light could detect.

The day I went to move in, Amy's ex-boyfriend, this skinny ponytail fuck, was to help me carry a few things, and the guy refused to speak with me, or even shake my hand.

I should have broken it off then, gone back to the dorms, I guess, but I'd already signed the lease.

It wasn't an auspicious start.

At first the house was okay. It was a rundown, aging two-storey structure. But it sat directly across the street from campus and was big, had five bedrooms, a kitchen and spacious living room. The other girl living there, Samantha, and I got along well, with her being from upstate New York. She'd come for the same program as me but had dropped out, was working nights at a Nissan factory. She was cool and easygoing. I liked her.

But the guys upstairs I didn't like. At all. They were these creepy, hairy fucks, with long beards, Viking-looking motherfuckers, and they were dirty as shit.

We started having cockroaches in the house (me and the two girls on the first floor finding them), and the roaches turned out to be crawling down from upstairs.

It got so bad we hired an exterminator and the landlord had me meet and escort the exterminator upstairs because the Vikings were out of town.

What we found upstairs was appalling. Absolute, utter slobbery, filth like I'd never seen. I don't think they'd cleaned. Ever.

There was an ocean of garbage- mostly empty bottles, burger wrappers, plastic bags, and soiled tissues- the waves of garbage carpeting the floors. It looked like a landfill. And there was half-eaten food, dirty dishes on every table and counter.

And there were bugs, tons and tons of bugs, mostly roaches, fucking colonies, fucking entire species of them, on the walls, crawling about on the floors, the roaches feeding and breeding in the omnipotent filth.

The exterminator was an old redneck with a scraggly gray goatee and mullet. He said he'd worked in the bug business for decades and grumbled the Vikings' place was about the worst infestation he'd ever witnessed, about as bad as the worst government projects in the ghetto. (He'd used a certain epithet in describing the projects, too, which I won't repeat.)

The landlord was so pissed, he evicted the Vikings. But the carnage they inflicted on that house didn't end there.

We'd been supposed to share a gas bill. The gas was what heated our house, our water tank, fired up our stove, so without the gas, we not only had no heating, but no hot water or stove, either.

Well, we soon had no gas, no stove, no hot water, and it was all because the Vikings never bothered to pay any of the bills or bring them to us to split. Worse yet, they'd been leaving the windows open upstairs, which made the heating system pump more gas, driving up the bill further.

After they moved out, my landlord discovered the bill. He refused to pay it, saying it was both the Vikings' fault and ours, and that we needed to pay it. Problem was, it was in the Vikings' names, and they'd skipped town.

The bill was in the thousands, too, and we couldn't afford to pay it...

Soon enough, the gas company shut us off. We offered to start a new account, but they wouldn't let us. Their collection assholes claimed that as long as an outstanding bill that high remained at the address, the company wouldn't provide service.

So, we were fucked. No heating. No ability to cook. No hot water. I resorted to taking showers at the school gym. My roommates were taking bucket showers (heating water in the microwave and washing themselves with it).

Already a difficult situation, we had to pay additional rental fees for the house. (To make up for the Vikings' absence. Since, as could be expected, it was difficult

to find anyone who'd move into a place without hot water, heating, and a functional kitchen.)

And with things being ugly as they were, we soon turned on each other.

Amy had trouble making her part of the rent. She, like Samantha, had failed out, dropped out of college and was working.

I'd been doing okay, financially, thanks to my newfound interest in computers and coding, which had led me to start an online business designing and promoting webpages. I'd worked with a couple local artists in the Nashville area, a couple rappers and a rock band, too, designing and maintaining webpages for them, helping sell their merch and promote shows.

Plus, I was doing my own tunes and selling my music online, mostly the experimental electronic noise and comedy rap I'd been dabbling with, in my bedroom, on my keyboard and computer. But it was lucrative. I'd cashed in on mp3.com in its heyday and earned thousands.

(Crack Whore Lewinsky. That was me!)

((Of course, in hindsight, I wish I'd spent that time building a webpage like YouTube or Facebook, which were both in development at the time. Instead, I was writing raps like "Flowin' on the Mic like Vaginal Discharge"; "OJ with a Knife"; "I Fuck Dead People" and "Give You Fire Hose Enema." Zuckerberg might be a billionaire, but he never busted such ill bars. Though I wonder what he'd sound like rapping... And I'd challenge him to a gangsta rap duel. EVEN TODAY...))

Back to Amy. While Amy wasn't my girlfriend, she did show me her tits once, and I made out with her, but she wouldn't let me fuck. And after we fooled around, she started mooching cash off me, expected me to pay her bills.

All the while she was still with her lame on/off again boyfriend who wouldn't shake my hand. Plus seeing this other ponytail fuck, who looked like an older version of her boyfriend, and who, she told me, had such a big dick that she wouldn't let him fuck her and so she would only blow him. The dude must have been around twenty years older than her too. I don't know. He looked like a meth addict, had this dried up, scrunched up muppet face that was rather haggardly.

I was really tiring of Amy bumming cash. She'd also be dirty around the house, too, and was bumming weed, bumming food. Generally being a mooch. She'd have large parties with tons of her dirty hippy friends, on nights when Samantha and me were working or when I'd have class and need to study.

Her friends, a few were nice, but most were weird, hostile towards me, because I was a "yankee" and all that. I always had a chilly vibe from most of them.

Samantha and I tired of Amy's shit, her parties and parasitic ways, so we decided to kick her out.

(If only she'd been blowing me, Amy, like she said she had a fetish for, I might have been more tolerant. But having a girl juicing you for cash and her not even being your fuck buddy or girlfriend, that wasn't acceptable, and believe me, I could understand if the situation was reversed, a girl not wanting to put up with a deadbeat loser dude, living on her couch. Especially one not even her boyfriend...)

Samantha and I confronted Amy and she denied doing anything wrong, said that we had money, Samantha and me with good jobs, so we should "just pay for things."

It was absurd she'd think that. And it certainly was unfair to us.

It pissed me off that she felt I should "just pay for things" when she wasn't my relative, my girlfriend, or even a good friend. If anything, she was a shitty friend, mooching stuff, never doing much of anything for Samantha and me, never cooked, cleaned, never helped us to do shit.

So we told her she had to leave the house. She was kicked out. Samantha and I had discussed it. Agreed on it.

After we told her she had two weeks to go, she'd broken down crying, bitched us out in a quavering squawk and stormed off, probably to her ex-boyfriend's trailer.

After her hissy fit, sitting there in that freezing cold house, with no hot water, I was pissed off, and my temper got the better of me. I made a mistake. I wrote her an angry letter, not insulting her, but simply stating what she'd done wrong, why she was kicked out, and wishing the best to her, though the tone was far from cordial.

That didn't go over well with her boyfriend, ponytail fuck one, the non-handshaker. After she'd plucked the letter from off her bedroom door, she'd driven over to the mobile home he shared with two other hicks and hand delivered it right to his ponytail ass, laid it bare in the hands that'd once refused my initial shake...

The next night, conveniently enough after I'd contracted a miserable case of the flu, and had a temperature of 102, the ponytail fuck came by the house, banging on my window, demanding to speak with me.

I wasn't up for any fistfights, in my weakened state, and told him so, telling him, through my window, my voice hoarse, that I was ill, not looking to fight- at least right now.

In his slack-jawed Southern whine, he said he didn't want to fight, only wanted to have a word with me, "as a man."

I went out to the veranda to meet him, and he proceeded to accost me, accusing me of being a rich kid, whose parents are millionaires. Which, first of all, was not true. They weren't. And second, I was paying my own way through college by working. (Not that any of that was his concern or had anything to do with his dirty iniquitous mooch of a girlfriend, either.)

He himself had flunked out of college and was working a crappy factory job, living, with roommates, in a mobile home, so I can understand his jealousy, antipathy. Here I was, having a touch of success with my music online, starting a mildly profitable business, and on the honor roll, too, rocking a near 4.0 GPA.

None of this made a failure like him any warmer to me. I'd made out, seen and fondled his girlfriend's tits too. Which I suspect she told him, since she'd told him of the other ponytail fuck, the one with a bigger dick than him. (He wasn't happy about that, either, and they'd had a horrible fight over it. Not sure if she went into details regarding the penis size issue...)

On and on the ponytail went, on the front porch, screaming, pitching a fit, saying how he'd kill me, or the girl's father, who, coincidentally, was also a ponytail fuck, would kill me. I told him I wasn't afraid of him, and I wasn't, and I wasn't afraid of her redneck ponytail fuck dad, either, and the next day, her dad called me and threatened to kill me, though apologized later, once I explained the situation and

assured him I wished no harm to her, only wanted her out of the house, which was true.

The non-handshaker ponytail wasn't quite as reasonable, though, and, as he took his leave, after his bitch fit, the fuck flicked a cigarette at me.

It didn't hit me, only landed near me, but it was crossing the line. At that point, even in a febrile state, I was ready to start swinging on him. Fortunately, his friend, a redneck who'd always worn low hanging, ass crack showing pants, and no shirt, even in winter, broke it up, got between us.

I thought he'd be a kind peacemaker, but he too was hostile and said that if I talked back, it would only make things worse and that Amy, in his words, was stupid, so I should give her time to leave.

It took me aback that he'd describe his friend as stupid, but he'd previously shared a house with her, from which I found out later they'd been evicted from, for similar, not paying bill type shenanigans, so he probably knew her better than me.

He did say one thing that made sense. He said that if you write angry letters like that, you'll get irate motherfuckers coming to your house freaking out. True redneck wisdom.

He was right about that.

I shouldn't have written that letter. Kicking her out was enough. Her ponytail fuck boyfriend might have done the same thing, regardless, though, and kicking her out was certainly the right course of action, that was for sure...

It sort of made me happy too, to piss them off so much that he came and told me to my face how he felt about me. How he hated my music. The stuff he called "the bullshit I did on my keyboard." The music that his girlfriend liked and kept in her car, shared with her friends. (Although after I kicked her out, she probably threw away my CD!)

I aver that anger, like alcohol, is a tremendous truth serum. Maybe the most effective of all. If you really want to know how someone feels about you, anger them, then see what he/she says.

It was fortuitous in more ways than one that Amy went on her merry way. I discovered later, from a mutual friend, that she'd contracted lice, given it to everyone, the whole redneck mafia, at her previous house.

Whereas the guys shaved their heads, and the ladies used lice-killing shampoo, Amy had to be forced into using the lice-killing shampoo, because she didn't want to "kill" the lice. She believed that they, the lice, had a right to live too. It wasn't until her roommates threatened to kick her out that she begrudgingly used the shampoo.

I shaved my head after hearing that, just in case.

That caused me to flashback and be glad I never fucked her, considering my problems with impulsivity, and fucking without condoms. Like, what if I'd fucked her that night we fooled around? How if I came inside her, like I did Jessica, and got her pregnant, I'd be a father, with a little curly-haired hippy or two running around... If she'd be so adamant about her lice's lives, imagine how she'd feel about a pregnancy...

I had a "friend suggestion" for her on Facebook, many years later, and saw she'd blown up in size, looked like a water buffalo, probably weighed twice what she did in college. Her preferred diet of BBQ and deep-fried Southern food not meshing well with an inevitable age-related decline in metabolism.

Like others I had unfortunate endings with, I don't hold ill will towards her. I definitely learned from that shitty experience, and I hope she did too. We were both young and stupid. And when you're young and stupid, you're young and stupid...

I was elated after she finally left, though. I wouldn't have to worry about her lice or her bullshit or her crazy, violent redneck hippy mafia. The slovenly Vikings and their cockroaches were gone too. But we still didn't have hot water or heating or a working stove. That certainly sucked.

Not long after Amy's departure the house was sold at auction after our landlord had a heart attack, died, and his widow decided to liquidate his properties.

The auction for the house was held in our backyard, on a sunny, crisp and cool Saturday morning. An authentic American style auction judge, a septuagenarian

auctioneer in a cowboy hat, boots with spurs, and a leather vest stood behind a wooden podium, speaking lightning fast, doing the auction chant, cattle rattle, cry of “buh-dee-buh-dee-ahh-one-fifty-buh-dee-buh-dee-ahh-,” eliciting bids from a crowd of a dozen or so genteel, old Southa’nah one percenters who stood placidly in a semi-circle around him.

(I bet probably every single person there had a grandfather who’d owned slaves...)

The place got sold, and the new management jacked the rent up, through the roof. It’d already been difficult enough for Samantha and me to handle, so I found an apartment nearby and split.

(The plus side of my landlord’s dying and the place’s ensuing sale was that our existing lease was terminated. The new ownership group had demanded we either sign a new lease or leave. I left.)

Samantha stayed slightly longer, having trouble finding a new place. She signed a short-term lease and was forced by the new management to pay for damages that the Vikings, me, and Amy and her hippy friends caused. It was usual wear and tear, but the new management was eager to burden costs on someone else.

She’d not even told me about it. I’d found out by chance when I’d bumped into her at the grocery store near campus, and, staring at the white floor in the produce section, she’d looked and sounded pissed off, didn’t make any eye contact as she meekly informed me of the bill, which was for three hundred bucks or so, I think.

I offered to help cover part of the bill, to Samantha, because I didn’t think it was fair that she pay it all. I told her to give me a call or email. I take a look at it. We’d work it out. But she never did call. Or email. I guess she was too nice. But it was probably that she was too non-confrontational.

I was walking by the house, a week or two later, and saw her with one of her boyfriends, stepping into her car. I stopped and said hello, asked her about the bill. Her boyfriend, a tall lanky dark-skinned black dude with a shaved head, baggy clothes, and gold hoop earrings, was looking at me, fucking pissed off, like he wanted to kill me.

Looking at Samantha's rosy cheeks, her wavy blond hair and blue eyes, her frumpy figure, it dawned on me that she looked similar to Jessica. At least in that lighting. At least in my eyes, then, to me, her angry face was similar to that of Jessica's.

I'd always thought Samantha was sort of cute, but she'd had a set of boyfriends, had never been single, and nothing ever transpired between us like things did with Amy. Samantha had never been around the house much at all, really, since she worked long hours. So I didn't know her well. I hadn't talked too much with her. She was shy, quiet, and private.

The only thing memorable I recall her saying was once we'd gone to Walmart together and the topic of Jesus freaks arose and she'd told me, in the car, in a hushed voice, like she was confessing to a crime, that she didn't believe in God and that she was afraid to talk about that in Tennessee because people got aggravated so easily at atheists.

Other than that, she was an enigma. Spent most of her time sleeping in her room or out with boyfriends when she wasn't working. I'm not sure why she'd stayed in Tennessee and never asked...

Back to when I'd run into Samantha by the house. I asked Samantha about the bill and she hung her head to the ground and mumbled that she'd paid it. I asked why she'd not gotten in touch with me. She didn't respond. Kept her blue eyes fixed to the less conversational ground. She was grumpy, obviously upset. I was on my way to a class, in a rush, but I told her to call me, that I'd help her. And I meant it. But again, she never called, and she didn't answer a couple of my calls or reply to my emails.

After not hearing from her, I went by the house, a couple weeks later, but she'd moved out. I never saw her again. I think she did leave Tennessee, or at least left the area, because I tried to phone her one last time and found that her number was disconnected.

The rest of my time at college was relatively serene, uneventful. I'd considered changing my major or transferring schools, being rather unhappy with living in Tennessee. But I decided to stick it out, and things improved when I found a tiny rickety old house, with a huge backyard, near the school to rent at an amazingly cheap price.

The backyard was big enough for me to play golf, and I'd putt, drive balls. It was great fun, especially golfing when wasted.

I found better friends, less violent, more chill hippies. And through a student union devoted to music, I linked up with a group of Black dudes from Memphis, who liked to smoke weed and were cool as fuck.

Upon leaving, I did feel sorrow, regret, that I'd stayed in Tennessee, not gone to a school in another area. Even though the remaining time was alright, still, it was tough living in that place. Being of darker complexion, I got many stares and dirty looks, and many were unkind to me when they'd hear my "yankee" accent.

My luck with the ladies there was abysmal, too. I just couldn't get anything going. I dated but didn't have a serious girlfriend the entire time. I did date a few memorable girls, however. Maybe the most memorable being this wild and wacky part Korean, part White girl.

She was a prison chick, had been in jail for selling coke. And I posit that prison chicks are fucking hot. Back when I was a kid, in addition to hair metal and horror movies, I confess that I'd had an affinity for chicks in prison movies. Like any movie featuring chicks in jail, I'd watch. I don't know why. But I loved chicks in prison movies. And, like hair metal and horror flicks, I remain a liker... So it was rad to meet a genuine prison chick. The realization of a dream...

She was cute, too, this girl. Funny, outgoing. She had a round face, dark, warm eyes, and a tight, petite body. The most amusing thing about her was her Southern accent, though, which was a hoot coming from her package. Not what you'd expect from an Asian girl, but it only made her cuter, and I sort of liked her...

We'd met at a mutual friend's house, where she'd gone to sell weed. I'd noticed her staring at me and struck up a conversation with her, got her number. A couple nights later, we met and went to a local nightclub, a big place with three packed

dancefloors, flashing strobe lights and a great sound system with teeth rattling bass. Most of the tunes they spun were crunk, dirty south hip-hop hits of the time. Think Lil Jon and Ludacris.

We were there, in a booth, drinking beers and shots of Jack Daniels, when she suddenly winced and got stiff as a metal pole after spotting her ex-boyfriend, who used to sell coke with her. Her face crimsoning, she nodded in his general direction, and I shifted in my seat to have a look.

Dude appeared like a local roughneck, the type you'd see in bad action movie, starting a fistfight in a bar. And, unfortunately, here we were, in bar...

He looked like a douchebag, and walked with a cocky, swaggering gait, and bumptiously smirking, high-fiving assorted clubgoers. His appearance struck me as sort of like a shorter, mini Matt Damon, but rougher, like the lost Matt Damon brother who'd been in jail and the media never mentioned much about it. Dude had barbed wire tats and this messy fop of dark blond hair that obscured most of his eyes and wore tight fitting blue jeans and a pink polo shirt with an upturned collar. Given his look, it was hard to be that afraid of him. Although I probably should have been.

He was with a friend, an even shorter fellow, I was slightly unnerved by. The little stocky dude had a shaved head that was slightly too big for his body, making his face look as if it were painted onto a hard-boiled egg. Even more discomfiting were his lightning eyes that flashed of rage and burned at me with a trail of fire when he peered in our direction.

It wasn't reassuring either when the girl whisper-yelled to me over the blasting music that the badass egg had been released from five years in a federal prison only a couple days prior. And the ex-con didn't seem as if he hadn't totally adjusted to life outside. It was more as if he was still mentally in the prison chow hall, plotting to shank a motherfucker. He had that aura, the prison psychopath aura, a jutting look of evil, and I could see him returning to jail pretty soon. He was the sort of person who probably needed to be in jail.

The pairs of toughs had noticed the girl, laughed, and then looked over at me as if they'd wanted to kill me. There was blood in their eyes.

They sauntered by, said an awkward hello and then sat down at an opposite booth from ours. The booth was dimly lit, but I could see from the shadows that they were giving us the evil eye. I could picture the angry egg dude sharpening a toothbrush under the table, readying to shank a motherfucker. And I could feel an uneasy tension in the air. There's a certain pheromone released before violence, before a rumble, a riot, or a fight. It's a sense that can be detected, a scent that can be smelled in the air.

It was certainly there.

Sensing it, I shouted to the Korean chick, over the "YEAH-YAH" of the music, that we should take off, and we did. I retreated in a cab, back to my house, where I passed out soon upon arrival, having sank too many shots of the Jack.

Later I found out that her ex and his prison friend were involved in a melee at the club, involving rival thugs, club security. The police had come, made several arrests, and as I hypothesized, the little angry egg dude found himself back in jail.

Needlessly to say, I was happy to have left before all that. Not exactly the ideal night out.

(That nightclub, itself, too, turned out to be shady. The lady who owned it also owned a bail bonds service directly across the street. The cops would lay in wait outside, near the parking lot, pull over and breathalyze those exiting. When they were booked for DUI, guess which company would be recommended for bail?)

I guess things were doomed from the start with that Korean girl. We had an initial attraction, at least, and had initially hit it off when we first met. It seemed like an auspicious match. She said she'd liked my "yankee" accent and was giving me the vibes, running her hand up on my arm a lot and laughing at all my jokes.

I'd liked her Southern twang and, though I didn't have an "Asian Fetish," I have always found Asian women to be very beautiful, and I thought she was certainly very pretty.

But then the first time we hang, I nearly get caught up in a fucking melee, involving her ex-boyfriend and some crazy prison dude.

Maybe I should have stayed away after that. I mean, hell, she was a prison chick after all. Sure, they're cute in the movies, but when redneck thugs start trying to

stab you and kill you, it's suddenly not so endearing. But still, she was funny, easygoing and attractive. She had killer weed too. So, against my better judgment, I saw her again.

She came by my house, at night, alone, with a bag of eye-poppingly pungent, crystal-coated red-haired weed. We sat in my living room, on the couch, and I noticed, in talking with her, that she had mannish mannerisms, sort of talked and acted like a dude. Seemed more like a bro than a lady. Still, she was looking nice as we smoked the ganja and watched the show "Frasier," which she'd been obsessed with, surprisingly.

Fuck, her juicy yellow thighs on full display and her tight round ass in her hot pants were hella ripe...

Looking at the TV, high, and seeing Roz and Daphne and sitting next to this cute Asian prison chick, I started feeling horny, my cock hardening. Then, randomly, she mentioned how she liked to suck dick and that the first time she'd done it, in high school, by a dumpster in an alley behind a roller skate rink, she'd immediately thrown up afterwards, but now she'd developed a fetish for it. (A fetish for oral sex, not vomiting- if I remember right...)

I was waiting to finish the blunt before jumping on top of this girl, and I definitely would have, if it wasn't for what she said next, her next random graphic proclamation, something I never thought I'd hear emitted from the lips of a woman. Something severely off-putting.

She told me, verbatim, while puffing on a blunt, that she had IBS and after every meal she ate, she had to take a huge, nasty shit.

Not that I don't know girls shit. Everyone shits. I accept this. But like I'd understand a girl I was dating not needing information about my bowel movements, I as well didn't require such information, such a graphic depiction.

(Am I an asshole for this? Love should be unconditional, right? Love me, love my dog, love my IBS? I don't know...)

Once I heard that, I couldn't shake the thought of her dropping massive logs, her just squatting and shitting everywhere, like a wild animal.

And I couldn't bring myself to be physical with her. I couldn't bring myself to touch her that night, and she fell asleep on my couch, untouched by me, and I went back to my bedroom, alone, and crashed soon after. She then left early the next morning, before I woke up, to go to her day job. (She'd been working as a beautician, doing electrolysis, hair removal on women's bodies.)

We again had drinks, met at this hick dive bar that was adorned with rebel flags and Tennessee Vols football memorabilia. Place was dead but still played ear-splittingly loud alternative rock music of the day. Think Puddle of Mudd.

Then we went back to my place and were again sitting on the couch, smoking weed. She inched closer to me, with a look of expectation in her sexy slanted eyes, her long fake lashes fluttering. She was anticipating a votive offering, that I'd put the moves on her, I guess, and I swung my head, met her expectant gaze. Part of me wanted to kiss her. But I was unable to do it. Because all I could think of was her on the toilet, squeezing out stink cables.

She cocked back her head, squinted, and then asked me, in an interrogator's tone, if I was a virgin. I said no. I couldn't bring myself to disclose the real reason for my reluctance to touch her. Awkward silence ensued. We ripped a few more bong hits, watched "Fear Factor" for a bit and she grumbled at the sight of the fame-seeking contestants drinking donkey piss or whatever and gathered her things, got up, said her goodbyes, and left with a look of disappointment, her face scrunched up like she'd tasted something really sour.

We didn't speak or see each other after that. I'd heard from our mutual friend that he'd heard that she'd fought off a dude who she sold weed to, who'd tried to rape her. Then she'd dispatched a pair of butch lesbians she knew from prison, set them after the fuck. My friend said he was at a party, and the lesbians charged in, found the would-be rapist, dragged the fuck into a bathroom, slapped him around and forced a dildo up his ass... I can't confirm how much of that was true, but I did hear the story of the angry lesbian anal assault confirmed by one other eyewitness from the party...

To this day, part of me regrets not making a move on the prison chick. She was a freaky chick, had even talked about being super into sodomy, blowjobs and anal. She was probably an amazing lay.

But, I just couldn't get over the thought of her dropping horrific turds everywhere, like five or so a day, she'd said. It was too unsettling a thought... As well, not that I'd ever rape a girl, but what if I'd gotten her mad about something and she set the angry lesbians after me? What if that was how she resolved disputes? Talk about having to "watch your back..."

I dated a couple girls casually after that, had a couple one nighters, but I never had a steady girlfriend in college. Not one. It's a regret I have because that's really the time when one should experiment, have lots of boyfriends and/or girlfriends, or at least one or two.

But at least I wasn't a virgin. I had dated and was only an occasional incel, wasn't a total incel. Maybe the funniest date I went on was a girl I met online. In her picture, she looked attractive. Then we met at a Chinese buffet, and I was shocked to discover she had a googly eye. Fucking strabismus. The whole meal, I couldn't tell if she was looking at me or the waiter.

Another amusing one was a girl I'd been set up with by a mutual friend. It was a blind date.

I walked up the stairs, to her apartment, to meet her. Nervous, my heart thumping, I rang the doorbell and this sizzling-hot blond, in short shorts and tank top, opened the door. I'm thinking "jackpot!" I was elated. I stretched my mouth into a smile about a mile wide, nodded my head, and gave her the Joey from "Friends" "How YOU doing?"

Turns out it was her roommate. The girl I was to meet then walks over and was about two hundred pounds and had the face of a pig.

Despite being horribly unattractive, she was a nice person, and we'd had pleasant online chats. I'd thought, selfishly, callously, of making up an excuse and darting out of there. But I stayed and, while waiting for her to get ready, I remember watching their TV, seeing news coverage of a citywide blackout in downtown NYC.

I'm glad I didn't run off because it was a fun date, I must say. We went to downtown Nashville, ate at an amazing restaurant/bar, had authentic Southern comfort food, saw an excellent live band.

Seeing live music in Nashville is a desideratum for anyone living there or just passing through. Even if you're not into country western music.

I'd never been a fan of country music, and still am not, really, but when you see it performed live you learn to appreciate the craftsmanship, musicianship behind it. Living in Nashville gave me a new respect for the artform, and I quite enjoyed the country band we saw at that bar/grill. It was the type of music that if I heard it on TV or the radio, I'd turn the dial, but hearing it live was different. It was awesome, sounded so big, so alive. Nashville has some serious talent, and after living there, the musicians in that city earned my respect...

On the way back from that date, on the highway, the existential topic of death came up in the car. The girl's hot roommate and her boyfriend and I were discussing it.

I brought up an article I'd read that described near death experiences. How scientists believed that the brain is the last organ to go, how the brain can still function for a time after death, explaining the "tunnel of light" experiences, visions had by people who'd been clinically dead.

I'd read that the brain could possibly stay alive, for days, after the body itself is dead, and that one could feel, experience autopsy, burial, cremation.

Hearing this scared her friend so much that she said something like, "No matter what happens, I'm always going to remember this conversation. And I'm just NOT going to die. Ever!"

I wonder if she held to that, if she didn't die. And if not, if she's alive, I wonder if after all these years, if she remembers our conversation, in the car that night, on that Nashville highway.

I do.

33

When I left Tennessee, I'd originally planned to go to New York City, to seek work in the entertainment business. Or maybe L.A. Most of the music business in

Nashville was country, which, although I'd developed a respect for, I didn't wish to work in.

My plan was to infiltrate a record label, establish connections, either through interning, or working at a label, and then form a group, have that group be signed to a deal, and hopefully become famous, be a star.

But by the time I finished college, while I still loved music, I'd stopped writing, playing. I don't know why. I'd spread my music around online, had over a million page hits to my website, hundreds of thousands of downloads, and gotten major label interest, though my demo was rejected, regarded as "too experimental, edgy" for the label, but a senior record executive had told me he liked me, that he'd wanted to hear more, told me to do something more commercial, and had asked me to send another demo...

I'd planned to start another group, do something different, something more dance-pop. I'd gotten into Alice DeeJay, trance, wanted to try more electronic music. But I wasn't able to make anything pop enough or commercial enough... Everything I produced wound up too weird or edgy for radio...

I enjoyed it, though. I liked what I was doing. And I liked the freedom of doing weird, fucked up and crazy music. I didn't want to conform, make my music into solely a product, make music only for money. And I started to have new dreams.

My focus started to shift from producing music to other pursuits, namely, business and entrepreneurship.

For a short time, I'd become more interested in purely the business side of music, had thought of forming a music label, signing groups, singers, developing, producing talent. I did produce a group or two, a few demos, with a couple local rappers, and a Christian rock group, of all things, but nothing took off.

This was around the time, however, that downloading, file-sharing became a thing.

I was becoming disillusioned with the direction the music business was headed. It was always shady, but I'd envisioned working for or starting a label with fair splits of revenue for artists, doing things in a more ethical, musician friendly manner. Then, though, the business was diverging even farther from that, and I was

especially grossed out by the emergence of “360 deals” where music labels were siphoning every stream of an artist’s income (shows, merch, etc.) to recoup lost income from file sharing.

(I’d also found I didn’t like the schmoozy aspect of the music business, the ass-kissing I’d seen, the plastic people, plastic smiles and forced laughs. So many of the record label executives I’d seen or met were scumbags, and I was having second and third thoughts of working with such slime...)

Having taken a few business and accounting classes for my major, I was becoming more interested in going into business, not the music business, but finance. The business of business. The business of money.

I’d become fascinated by stocks, financial markets and had become intrigued in working in financial services or accounting.

(In reflection, I really wish I had changed my major to accounting or a finance related field. Especially on a practical level, when I entered the “real world” and found out how useless my “music business” diploma was, especially in the age of record label consolidation, downloading and rampant piracy.)

I’d had an existential reckoning the night of September 10th and morning of September 11th, 2001. On 9/10/2001, I’d attended a lecture about finding a “job” after graduation, how to do it, writing a resume, alternate routes to take. It was my sophomore year, and I’d not given much thought to life after graduation. I left the lecture dreading what might happen after I took off that cap and gown...

Then, the next morning I woke up late because I didn’t have class until 11 a.m. and had been working online into the small hours of night. This was pre-smartphone, and I didn’t turn on the TV or computer. I listened to music as I showered, ate breakfast. I even jerked off in the shower, fantasizing about a girl in my class’s fantastically hot, tight and round ass.

Leaving, walking to class, there was an eerie feeling in the air. It was a beautiful late summer day, warm, blue skies. But there weren’t many people around campus. I’d wondered if it was a holiday or there was something I’d missed. I passed by a couple attractive girls sitting in the shade under a pine tree next to the building my class was in, and they looked distraught, and so I smiled at them, which made them look back at me, eyebrows raised, as if I were nuts.

On the door to my class, there was a simple handwritten note, left by my professor, saying that “class was cancelled.” There was no explanation why. So I went home, turned on the computer, and saw the news online, flicked on the TV, watched the planes flying into the buildings on continual loop.

I phoned people I knew in NYC; everyone was shaken up, obviously. A lady from my old neighborhood, who I didn’t know personally, but knew of, was aboard the plane that struck the Pentagon.

Going from thinking of my future for the first time, what I’d do after graduation, to the entire world changing, in one day, in one morning, taught me a valuable lesson on how fast things can change. It made me realize how futile plans can be. No matter how well we think them out. It really made me ponder my future in an entirely different light. Of course, many of my classmates had similar thoughts. One telling our professor that at least he didn’t have to worry about “being drafted.”

(As for one positive side note, people in America, even down there in Tennessee, at that time, were so united. I’d never seen that sort of camaraderie, togetherness, and haven’t seen it since. Particularly in this day and age of hyper-partisanship, Twitter Wars, and polarized Red v. Blue politics...)

Maybe it was 9/11 that changed my focus. I don’t know. I’d become far more interested, anyway, in financial markets than in the music business. I’d come very close to changing my major, and really wish I did, but I decided to stay the course I’d chosen, partially because I’d come so far, and also due to financial reasons, not wanting to have to spend additional years in school and have to burden myself financially.

I figured, too, that I’d have a college degree. Being a college grad would open doors. And I could easily change career paths...

So I stuck it out. I stayed the course.

It was another in my long list of mistakes.

I returned to Miami during the winter break before graduation. I'd gone back to catch a Caribbean cruise that I'd bought myself as a graduation present.

(These sorts of cruises left Miami all the time. Embarrassingly, I'd never been on one, and had never visited my Caribbean neighbors. During a wickedly cold winter in Nashville, I decided then would be the perfect time...)

Since the cruise departed from nearby South Beach, I figured I'd spend a couple days there. I'd not gone to South Beach much, since, when I was growing up, it was known as "God's Waiting Room," only having old people in retirement homes. Then for a while it'd fallen into disrepair and decay.

I'd been hearing from my old pals in Miami how happening South Beach had become. But I'd struggled to shake off the vision I'd had of it as populated predominantly by elderly Jews talking like Woody Allen and hobbling around on walkers, eating bagels and complaining of arthritis while waiting for their turn to meet God. So I had to check the "new" South Beach out, see it with my own eyes...

This was the mid-2000s, and South Beach was booming, literally, financially, construction-wise, and party-wise.

Upon arrival at the airport, by the baggage carousel, I'd struck up a friendly conversation with an airport employee, an aging Latin fellow, who'd retained a head full of beautiful, jet-black swept back hair, as many Latin men do, later in life. He'd told me that South Beach now was like "Paris," filled with young people, cafes, and partying. He told me that if he were still young and handsome, like me, that's where he'd be living. And he then asserted, prophetically, that I'd have a "blast" there...

As soon as I'd crossed the causeway, in my rental car, and drove up A1A, I instantly saw what the talk and hype was about, and I myself instantly fell in love with South Beach. Arriving to my hotel too, I had a strange feeling that I'd been there before in a past life, like I'd been there as a ghost. The whole place, environment had an eerie, familiar feeling to it.

(My great-grandmother had a house on Collins Ave, in South Beach, many years ago, which could explain the déjà vu...)

Looking around, it was as if South Beach was this great lost city that I'd discovered like an archeologist. It was like Atlantis rising from the sea. Or possibly it was a tropical playground, newly rebuilt, for the sole glory of pleasure.

Whatever it was, I fucking dug it... Was enthralled...

The whole South Beach area, that little southern tip of the Miami Beach barrier island, had been resuscitated and injected with adrenaline. It was glitzy and lively and teeming with business, cash, and beautiful young bodies...

Massive, glittering glass-plated towers, luxury condominiums and upscale hotels had been erected everywhere, shining in the sun like tropical trophies, as if the adjacent swaying palm trees were their garlands. And the beach's Art Deco buildings had been renovated and were simply radiant. The Art Deco structures gloriously returned to their past splendor. The structures awash in brilliant pastels- toothpaste blues, spring greens, and hot pink hues.

And the nightlife was especially fabulous.

Numerous nightclubs, big neon boxes with imposing entrances and droplet chandeliers were opening and many a Hummer, Rolls Royce, and Lamborghini were prowling the streets. There were tricked-out Cadillacs chopping blades and booming bass. The once somnolent beach was alive, screaming and kicking, had burst out of its swampy crypt like a coked-up, dancing Frankenstein.

There were millionaires and billionaires. And all the celebs of the day like Paris Hilton and Jamie Foxx and their hangers-on and groupies and aspiring star and debutantes were frequenting the nightlife scene.

Just strolling along Ocean Drive after sundown, it was like a shower of sparks. The neon lights making every night look like a tropical Christmas.

And the days, the days were a panacea for my recent malaise. The 70-80-degree sun-splashed days were a salubrious, soul-cleansing tonic after arriving from the purgatory of ice and gray skies and sub-zero temps of wintery Tennessee.

It was December in South Beach. And on the beach, there were pretty girls lying like golden angels in the golden sands, basking in the waxy yellow light of the equatorial sun. Some of the beauties even sunbathing topless, causing my heart to skip a beat...

Glancing around the paradise, panning my gaze at the atmosphere, and drinking in the salty sea breezes, I'd think I was in Heaven as I took my meditative walks along the beach. I awed in admiration as I eyed the frolicking beauties in the sands. I marveled as I watched the frothy ocean waves pulling and slapping at the shoreline. Seeing such a perfect scene, I started to wonder if God really did exist... Maybe the Christians in Tennessee were right after all...

During my stay, I caught up with a couple old school pals and neighbors over beers. We ate scrumptious Cuban cuisine and laughed, talked old times.

Sipping on a cold brew, I thought back to the friendly fellow from the airport. Was he ever right that I'd love it in South Beach... Perhaps he was a psychic or a fortune teller...

I certainly did have a blast. I was thrilled to be in a place where I felt like I belonged, could be myself. Could be with people like me. I realized, after leaving Miami, how much I loved it. How much I missed it. How many people there were so fucking cool. How many friendly Latin folks, cool Cubans, Colombians there were. Not to mention people like me and my family. Transplants from the "North." Us "yankees" everywhere. All the snowbirds and sun-worshippers from NY and New England, who looked like me and talked like me.

I totally dug, too, finding party people in South Beach, from all over the country. Out having drinks, my old pals and I met party people from all over the world, too. Loads of Eurotrash, Israelis, Australians, South Americans. The place was like the UN for partying and debauchery. It fucking rocked.

It was a most welcome change from being in Tennessee. I seriously felt at home there, in South Beach. People didn't glare or stare at me or give me nasty vibes. People had dark, olive complexions like me. It was the most magnificent feeling. Indescribable. I was feeling like an inmate furloughed from jail...

I remember, in a bar, hearing that Cure song "Just Like Heaven," and that was how I felt. Like I was in Heaven.

The cruise, too, was a blast. I met up with a crazy crew of autoworkers from Detroit and a wild pair of chicks from L.A. We drank, ate like kings and queens. The cruise ship was incredible, too. It might as well have been a big 5-star floating hotel. It had an assortment of entertainment, movies, swimming pools, Jacuzzis,

gyms, nightclubs, bars, and restaurants. And the food, oh my, the ship's food was delectable, gourmet quality.

I'd heard of cruises being for old people only. Not this one. There were people of all ages.

(Even, embarrassingly, some teens. There was one I ran into, at a bar, and I started hitting on her, thinking she was 21 or so. I mean, she was there drinking, and was wearing a ton of makeup, whore paint. But she was actually only 15! Thank goodness I asked, and she was honest! Needless to say, I got away from her, ASAP!)

I had one of the best times of my life in South Beach, and on that cruise. I spent the last couple nights shacked up with a fun and goofy Greek chick, who was a couple years older than me, and had a super tight body. She'd also been single for a spell. And, needless to say, we both let out a lot of repressed sexual rage. We went at each other like alley cats, used one another's bodies as amusement parks...

When the cruise, vacation finished, though, and I had to return to Tennessee, it was brutal. Soul-crushing.

I cried when I got back there. It was freezing cold, too, everything iced over, looked like the fucking Artic.

But I made a decision, then, that I regret in some ways, relish in others. I decided that I liked South Beach so much, and that since there were music business companies there, entertainment venues, that I'd do my college internship at a company in South Beach instead of NYC or L.A.

That whole spring semester, my final term in Tennessee, I threw myself into work and my studies. I rocked my grades and crushed online part-time IT gigs, raking in tidy little sums of cash. And I stayed focused on returning to Miami. I researched South Beach, best places to live, hang. And I set out to get into the best beach shape possible.

I began working out harder than ever. I'd work out, six days a week, two or three hours per day. Lifting weights, running, doing thousands of crunches. I got a cut six-pack. I was ready for the beach. I listened to Paul Van Dyk's "Politics of

Dancing” compulsively. It was the CD I’d listened to while in South Beach and on the cruise. Hearing the tunes, the synths and beats, the thumping trance, took me, mentally, out of Tennessee, brought me back to the heat, to the sun, to the sands and seas, brought me back to the beach.

My body was in Tennessee, but my mind was in South Beach.

I watched every movie I could set in Miami. “Miami Blues” being my favorite.

I played GTA: Vice City. I watched the Latin channel on TV, which occasionally broadcast from South Beach, and I brushed up on my Spanish.

Finally, after a couple small get-togethers over weed and beers, with the few friends I’d made there, the day I’d been waiting for mercifully arrived- the day to leave Tennessee. I’d decided to spend the last night at an airport hotel because I had an early flight.

I’d been so psyched to leave Tennessee, had been counting down the days. But when the cab came to take me from my tiny house I’d rented, for three years, and when we were pulling out of the driveway, an unexpected tsunami of sadness crashed in and enveloped me in gloom.

The cab driver was a friendly local (while my experience there was largely negative, I did meet many wonderful people. Southern hospitality is a true tradition, and, despite having a rocky time, some of that cultural, some of it my own damn fault, I do, by and large, greatly admire and respect the South and its people!)

And this cab driver was one of the fucking coolest people I met there.

He glanced at me, in his rearview mirror, and sensed right away that something was awry.

“You’re looking at that place like you don’t want to leave it,” he said, peering at me in the rearview mirror, with his eyes narrowed and a concerned expression coloring his bearded face.

I told him he was right. I was moving out after three years and many memories.

I don’t remember what we talked about on the ride to the hotel. I was feeling shell-shocked. Feeling like I’d stayed too long, should have done something else. I

was pushing a psychic wheelbarrow of regret. I regretted not going out more, seeing more around the area, travelling more, meeting more people, dating more girls. Perhaps smoking less weed. Perhaps changing majors. Perhaps doing a lot different with my life.

That house had been my safe place. I'd ridden out 9/11 there. I'd ridden out 3 years in that little shotgun shack of a house, the little slice of Americana; ridden out three years, sitting on my couch, taking bong hits, studying and working from home in safety, playing golf in my backyard, cooking lots of quick pasta dinners, cooking lots of eggs and strips of bacon.

Now here I was venturing out into the unknown. Swimming out past the breakers, wading into the ominous "real world."

I don't remember what we talked about on the ride to the hotel, but I do remember the cabbie saying to me, when he dropped me off, that he "hoped I have a good life, and I mean that." And I could tell by the look in his eye, the way he spoke, that he meant it. It was one of the more touching things anyone had ever said to me. He didn't have to take an interest in me. He didn't have to care. He could have listened to the radio, dropped me off, been on his way.

But he took the time to chat with me, cheer me up, wish me well. A truly decent and kind human being, that guy. Wherever he is, whatever he's doing, I wish him the best and thank him for his caring. It was a touching send-off.

My eyes get glassy just thinking about it....

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Getting back to Miami, I knew I had to live on the beach. In South Beach. There was no other place I wanted to be. Plus, that's where most of the entertainment business was, or was near.

I got a cheap hotel room, by the beach, and was determined to find an apartment nearby. And I did find one. I soon landed an inexpensive, yet spacious studio in a set of apartments above a gelato shop. It was a killer location, too. Only a block away from the beach and only a block from the Versace Mansion.

(In front of the mansion, which has now been converted into a hotel, is the spot where Gianni Versace was tragically shot and killed. I remember passing by that spot, regularly, and feeling the negative energy, on that strip of pavement. Once, late at night, I swear I saw a ghostly figure resembling Mr. Versace, an apparition, at the mansion's front door, attempting to open the door, to no avail, and then vanishing, like a swarm of flies, into the eternal humidity of the night...)

It had been a seismic shift, going from a small university town outside Nashville, to being in the heart of South Beach.

Just walking around the circumambient streets was like injecting a drug. It was intoxicating. The lights, the neon signs on buildings lit up at night. The mottled bright colors, the pinks and greens, the Art Deco architecture.

The cars around there, too. There was every sort of vehicle imaginable. Luxury cars, limousines, Vespa scooters, Hummers, buckets. Everything. My favorites, though, had to be the 1950s vintage American cars, so well-maintained, polished up and elegant as Christine. The boat-like things, with their caramel leather interiors, tailfins, and big round headlights, bright and bursting like twin stars.

It was as if every vehicle in South Beach had a special shine to it, the way they would glint and speckle in the sun.

I was loving the culture, too, art galleries with traveling exhibitions. It seemed like there was top-notch art talent everywhere. Young painters by the beaches and on the streets, poised to be the next Picasso.

And the music. The music! The hot nights were alive with hot live music, music pouring from bars, restaurants and clubs, powering the party. There were such great, swinging Salsa bands. Salsa so carnal and vibrant that it made you want to tear off your clothes, jump, and dance naked in the night. And there were so many awesome radio stations, too, playing everything from Latin music to dance, hip hop, pop, and rock.

I also found myself reading and highly enjoying the entertaining and insightful Miami New Times newspaper. As well as returning to reading print editions of my long-time favorites, The Miami Herald and Sun Sentinel.

While I'd loved the food in the South, the Tennessee BBQ, South Beach was a truly diverse culinary paradise. Eliding a plethora of cuisines, with its daring fusion restaurants. And the beach boasted numerous fantastic restaurants, of all sorts, from Latin, to Asian, to American to Euro.

But the most delicious thing in South Beach, which was also the best scenery, was the walking works of art: the girls. Every sort of beautiful woman imaginable was in South Beach. The girls were even hotter than the climate. The Latinas, the South American ladies, and the European ladies there. Wow, wow, wow! They were immaculately beautiful! Cartoonishly beautiful! The Latin women with such impossibly perfect curves!

There were tons of models everywhere. Many agencies had headquarters in South Beach. So you'd see tall lovelies slinking and strutting all over.

(I found very little use for porn while living in South Beach. One only had to exit his/her dwelling, have functional vision and look around outside, especially at the beach, and the mind would be suitably stuffed with erotic imagery...)

The beach was one of the spots where the beautiful people would congregate, understandably, to flaunt their bodies. Because... Why not? Why spend that time in the gym? Why diet? Why buy a bathing suit if you can't wear it? And what's South Beach without its beaches? In South Beach, the beach is the main attraction... I was there every day, my six-pack on full display...

The beaches featured beautiful locals, tourists, topless sunbathers. It was packed with eye candy. But it was more than just a place to ogle flesh. There was life, activity of all types. Everyone from surfers, runners, swimmers, walkers, artists, musicians, dancers, yogis, and folks playing volleyball, Brazilians doing Capoeira.

At night, the beach didn't sleep, either. Night was a wonderful time to go for a late run, since it was cooler than daytime, less crowded. It was fun to walk on the beach at night, too, breathe in the salty air and glance up at the starlit skies and the endless, black ocean, with its flickering lights from cargo ships off in the distance. There'd be parties, bonfires, too, at night, and one could spot couples under blankets, having sex. Once I saw a young Black couple fucking in the bushes nearby the entrance to the beach...

(As the guy was banging the girl, from behind, I could hear his pelvis slapping at her ample buttocks, and the girl was cursing at him between feral moans, calling him, repeatedly, a “pizza eating nigga,” which I found slightly erotic, in a sinister way...)

Of course, it wasn't all fun and fucking, wasn't all glitter and gold, South Beach. One of my neighbors, a young Colombian dude, was missing an arm, and he'd told me he'd had it chomped off by a shark as he surfed past the breakers, in the ocean, right nearby our building.

(There are countless shark attacks in Florida. But most of them involve small “bull sharks” that didn't usually kill, only would take a nasty bite, rip off an arm or leg. A cautionary tale for swimming or surfing past the breakers, which is where the sharks usually lurk. Though once, a small shark swished past my leg, and I felt its slimy, cold body brush the side of my calf. This was not even too deep in the sea. Seeing the shark, I steeled my nerves, calmly walked backwards, and got out of the water unharmed, thankfully. I never entered that strip of water again...)

As for the beach itself, with all the tourists and partying, it could get quite filthy. There'd be lots of litter, especially in the morning, residue from the previous night's partying, as well as pools of piss and vomit, used condoms, and I once found a bloody tampon in a parking garage next to the beach. The worst I saw, though, had to be broken glass which appeared sprinkled into the sand purposely...

There were tons of crazies around there, many homeless. One in particular who looked like a shit-encrusted version of Jesus, long hair, beard and everything. He'd stalk around the beach, screaming and yelling nonsense at people. One afternoon I saw him walking down the street naked, and he walked into traffic, squatted, dropped a shit in the middle of the road, then rose and stepped off calmly, as if nothing happened. I remember passing motorists, aghast, honked at him and gesticulated, though I'm not sure what they thought their honking and gestures might accomplish...

He'd beg for money too. Once I saw him beg for a dollar from a passerby, and the passerby asked him what he'd do for the money, that he better sing or dance or something if he wanted to get paid. I'd never heard that response to a homeless

beggar and was simultaneously appalled, depressed, and amused (in a gallows humor sort of way).

There were many homeless around South Beach. Part of it was that mental hospitals nearby had been shut because of budget cuts, leaving the mentally ill with nowhere to go. And part of it was that warm places tend to draw homeless. Better to be homeless there than in a place where it's freezing. In addition, many in South Beach were made homeless due to land development companies buying up properties to build luxury condos, evicting long-term residents, many of whom were senior citizens in rent-controlled apartments and had nowhere to go, no one to help them.

It was depressing as fuck seeing an elderly bag lady collecting leftover food from the dumpsters behind an overpriced tourist trap restaurant.

Many of the homeless were mentally ill, but many weren't. They were down on their luck or had retired to Miami Beach and were thrown out of their homes by developers. It's despicable that a city, state, country would treat its residents, citizens in such a heartless way.

There was a fair amount of violence, too, but nothing like across the bridge, in Liberty City, Overtown or Opa Locka. I saw fistfights here and there, in South Beach, but not too many, and Suge Knight got shot in the ass, at a party near my apartment. Though, still, for the most part, it was generally safe, aside from scattered burglaries.

Including the burglary of my apartment, and other apartments in my building.

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An asshole burglar (or burglars) had climbed onto a ledge, smashed open a window, and cleaned me out, stealing my laptop and TV. But, worst of all, they jacked a book of CDs, many of which were rare, tough to find electronic music, and to this day I've not replaced every one of them. The burgling bastards!

But it wasn't as bad as what happened to a chick I met at a sushi bar nearby my apartment.

She, the ex-wife of an NFL player, a linebacker for the Bengals, came home one night to find a robber inside her apartment. The robber, a young kid, attacked her with a screwdriver, slashing her arm, stabbed her in the chest, just above her tit (very, very fortunately not hitting the silicone!) and she was able to fight him off by kicking him hard in the balls and running away.

She showed me the scars to prove it.

(Quite a pretty lady, a bleach blond beauty, maybe ten years my senior. I should have asked her out or gotten her number. We talked for a while at the sushi bar, hit it off, and then I left after finishing my meal. Surprisingly, she seemed disappointed when I departed. As an older, wiser guy, I'd for sure seize the opportunity, because even if she turned me down, so what, but at the time, it didn't occur to me that this older, beautiful woman might have wanted to jump my bones. The axiom: "youth is wasted on the young" couldn't be more apt in this instance...)

Aside from getting burgled and the sad plight of the area's homeless, my time there was one of the best in my life.

I quickly made friends. It was so multi-cultural there, and, with my dark looks, I fit right in, many mistaking me for Latino, speaking Spanish to me, until I'd reply, "Yo soy gringo. Yo no hablo mucho Espanol."

Sure, there were stuck-up bitches and rich assholes, but I met tons of cool people, and dated a lot.

The first girl I dated in South Beach was a Moroccan girl, who worked at a restaurant nearby and gave me free food. We went out a few times, and I helped teach her how to drive. She was very cool, and we had fun together. She was pretty, with olive skin and her long curly black hair and voluptuous figure. She was easygoing and smart, too, and had a hilarious snorting laugh. She'd worked as a bartender, but it turned out her family back in Morocco was loaded. They were strict, though, too, and soon demanded she return from what I discovered was an extended vacation...

Then there was a Venezuelan chick. This thick little cute thing. She had short green dyed hair that ran just past her ears and she wore tons of eyeliner and mascara. We started off, hooking up online, but after a couple dates, we realized

it was more of a friendship type thing, which was cool, because she was cool, and we smoked weed together, hung out, went out clubbing. She liked a lot of the same music I did, at the time, lots of trance and electro stuff. She danced like a Latin girl too. I loved how she'd move and sway to music.

She knew a lot of chill people in South Beach, and through her I made tons of friends. She had this posse of gay dudes who liked to smoke weed and were generally cool as fuck. Hanging out with them really changed the way I thought of gay people.

I'll admit that growing up in the 1980s and 1990s, I was homophobic. My stepbrother, people in school who picked on me or others called me a "fag." It was the worst thing you could be called, a "fag" or a "faggot."

Along with my stepbrother, friends in school spewing hate towards gays, there were stand-up comedians like Eddie Murphy and Sam Kinison, whose work I still love, but their bits on gays were ugly and implanted ideas in my young mind that being gay was disgusting.

I had an uncle who was gay, and I'd spent time as a kid with him and his partner. But I was quite young and didn't understand it, didn't know they were gay or what gay people were until later. (That uncle basically abandoned me and my mom after my father died, so, on some level, I may have resented gays because of my resentment towards him.)

But yeah, until the late 1990s I'd thought of gays as gross, had friends in school espousing such axioms as, "God made Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve."

The first thing to make me feel differently, though, about gays, was reading Anton Lavey's "The Satanic Bible," out of curiosity, in college.

That book, to me, was an oracle. It was a revelation. Lavey's philosophy was a rejection of traditional Christian morals. It was a rejection of so many of ideas I'd grown up with. I was floored by the manner in which he drained oceans of ignorance and meticulously dissected and destroyed planets of dogma with his trenchant, brilliant prose. It was simply incredible; beyond anything I could have imagined. Reading that book changed how I thought. It changed who I was. (Now that is the sort of book that should be assigned reading in schools!)

I began to question God. Why would there be a God who'd allow such horrible things to happen, like rapes, the Holocaust, natural disasters, war, poverty, and pandemics. I started questioning everything and became agnostic, believing the only likely God to be Nietzsche's "absentee landlord" idea of a God.

(Thank you, Marilyn Manson, whose music I was listening to at the time, and who, in his ingenious autobiography, "The Long Hard Road Out of Hell," turned me on to Lavey.)

In questioning God, the Bible, I also questioned why it was that I should hate gay people.

Why should I care about their personal life? What business is it of mine? Life is short. Do what you want. Be who you are. As long as the people are willing participants, and of legal age, it's no one's concern what they do but theirs.

This was around the time when gay marriage became an issue, too. I immediately supported it. I didn't buy into any of this bullshit about "changing the definition of marriage."

Meeting the Venezuelan chick's gay friends further let me know what an ignorant asshole I'd been. They were chill as anything, smoked weed, liked sports, a couple were effeminate, but most weren't. Most I wouldn't know were gay if they'd not told me. I realized they were the same as me, just with different preferences in the sack.

(Hearing the stories of the persecution they'd suffered gave me a new empathy for them, too. Nearly all of them were like refugees in South Beach, there because their countries in South America were so intolerant of homosexuals. One of them, this freakishly tall dude, like 6'7, said how his parents in Venezuela divorced after he came out...)

One even told me how he liked women, found them pretty, but that pussy, to him, was disgusting. He thought there was nothing as revolting as a vagina. Everything about it turned him off. The way it looked. The way it smelled. That he considered it slimy. He winced as he spoke of it.

To me, I feel the same way about another dude's dick or ass. To me, man ass, aside from my own, which I like, man ass, to me, is the grossest fucking thing ever.

And guess what, both opinions are okay. And fuck you if you think otherwise. If Jesus, the original hippy, a totally chill Dude, were around today, He'd have the same opinion, I posit.

Hanging out with those dudes, and that girl changed me, opened my mind, and I'm incredibly grateful for having that experience.

We stopped hanging out, me and that thick chick, though. She'd left town for a while, because she'd been terrified of an approaching storm and had returned home to Venezuela.

As the hurricane cut its path through the Caribbean, she was freaking out, never having been in a storm like that before. She called me late at night, in tears, whimpering to me over the phone that she'd rather go back to Venezuela and take her chances with Hugo Chavez. Seeing the storm on the TV, the churning gray mass on the radar that was gunning for us had her in hysterics.

Through choking tears and snorts she screamed how she was "too young and too cute to die."

She was such a princess, or maybe a queen. Way more so than any of her gay friends.

She came back not long after the storm, which spared South Beach any severe damage, though it walloped the west coast of Florida.

The last time I saw her, I met her on a breezy evening, at a small club, near the American Airlines Arena. She was sloppy drunk, in a skimpy silver miniskirt, with wiggly underbutt bursting out from under the hem. Wild-eyed, she was dancing like an epileptic to electro. Seeing me, she limped over, nearly stumbling in her high go-go dancer heels, and she grabbed me by my t-shirt, thrust me toward her. Reeking of booze, she French kissed me for a few seconds and shoved me away, before slapping me in the face, stomping off and dry humping her tall gay friend's leg.

Then she rushed outside, vomited in some bushes in the back-patio area, near the cigarette smokers, and left, being nursed over to a waiting taxi, by her drag queen friend.

Not long after that, she stopped talking to me when I met another girl. A girl I met on the beach, one sunny Sunday.

A girl that would become my wife.

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I'll never forget the day I met her.

I'd been hanging with a buddy I used to party with, who lived in a building near me. A dude I met at the gym. This Filipino nicknamed "Nasdaq."

Nasdaq and I would go out clubbing, hit bars. He'd always be talking about, plotting ways to pick up girls. But when we'd go places, he could never muster up the courage to talk to them.

(Unlike me, who, after a few drinks, gave no fucks. Or like Nasdaq's friend, "Crazy Juan.")

((Crazy Juan was an absolute madman. He was a tall, swarthy, well-dressed Latino. A guy with a pockmarked face and the pockmarks somehow made him look more handsome. Dude had a bombastic personality; he'd hit any club or bar like a fucking tornado. This guy truly gave no shits. He'd step in a bar and yell over to me, "Hey, let's go get shot down by every girl in this place!" and he would. At times, he'd be too spastic for his own good. Importunate in his approach. Scaring chicks away. But, underneath, he was a decent guy, a kind soul. He was crazy, sure, but a lovable crazy. We only hung a few times before he left, departing for L.A. when he landed a job there.))

Nasdaq and I continued to hang, though, go out and hit the town. He'd usually just sit at the bar, or stand in the back of the club, lean on the wall and drink. I'd dance, hit on girls, and I'd never have much luck. A couple times I did, but most times I'd be shot down by snooty chicks, tall models, and even chubby girls.

Most of the girls I'd try to pick up would give me the identical, South Beach Shoot Down gesture, the hand signal, the palm held up to my face, like a traffic cop stopping oncoming vehicles.

(The joker in me wanted to slap their hand a playful high five. But I've never been one to touch without cause. And they usually rolled their eyes and clomped off quickly anyway...)

I'd didn't care much, though. Mostly I had better luck meeting girls in public or online. Going to bars, clubs for me was about being out, listening to the music, dancing, drinking, digging the lightshows, the atmosphere.

(Though the atmosphere wasn't always chill. One time I was taking an epic piss in a bathroom stall because the urinals were occupied. Oh, man, it was urgent, after drinking countless beers. As I was draining my lizard, I heard an ear-splitting knocking on the stall door and someone screaming at me to "quit it!" "No way, Jose," I yelled out. No way I was quitting a piss that glorious and relieving.)

((I came out to see a burly bouncer, his neck veins popped out. Dude had cauliflower ears and looked like a posterchild for steroids. He had a stiff, serious face and started berating me about "snorting that shit in there!" which I wasn't doing, and I told him I was taking a piss. He replied, saying that no one pisses that long. He'd obviously never seen me piss after seven or eight beers. He then commanded me to shut up and go dance. Which I obeyed and did.))

Besides getting shot down at clubs and accosted by burly bouncers, Nasdaq and I had been prowling the beach, mostly perving, stealthily, and occasionally attempting to pick up girls, but not usually having much luck in the sands either.

He'd happened upon a stretch of the beach, not far from us up A1A, where there was a language school, packed with smoking hot European chicks.

This was an English language school, an international chain, which had set up a campus in South Beach.

(Which was a strange place for an English language school, considering how few people in Miami spoke English, at least in daily life, or at home. In certain areas, virtually no English was spoken! Parts of Miami, you'd go into a store or

restaurant, and people were only speaking Spanish, many spoke no English at all. Like literally, they didn't speak the language...)

Nasdaq, on a solo perving expedition, had spotted this coterie of fine-looking European lovelies. He asked me to join him, so we could hit on them, try to score dates.

The morning he'd called me up, it was a Sunday, and I was sort of tired, after hanging with the Venezuelans the night prior.

I wasn't totally sure I'd go, but he talked me into it. I think he wanted help initiating conversations. He was too pathologically shy to approach girls, and it was usually me being the one to make first contact.

It's incredible to think of the vicissitudes of life, and how wholly different my path, my life would have been had I not joined him that morning. That one morning, that day, changed absolutely everything.

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The cloudless cerulean skies were crystal clear that late morning. It was October. And the weather was simply gorgeous, still hot and sticky, but less so than August or September.

(Those who say Florida has no seasons, has no winter, they've never lived there, and the fall there, October, November, is glorious and warm, and not as oppressively humid as summer- May to September. The winter, December to March, is ideal- crisp, sunny, and absolutely magnificent. Towns in Florida have names like "Winter Haven" for a reason.)

Nasdaq had told me the spot to meet him, where the European girls were, and I arrived first. He had an errand to run or something and came later.

I parked near the beach, and, in flip flops, a tank top, and swim trunks, swished through the beige sands and found myself in heaven. There were pretty young ladies everywhere.

It was like I was an Islamic terrorist who'd detonated a suicide vest, and I really was in Allah's promised paradise. However, the likelihood of them being virgins, now that was low. But you never know (until you know).

Not that I cared of their chastity. Quite the contrary. I was looking for fun. This time, those first few months in South Beach, were among the greatest times of my life. Being young, full of energy and so fucking alive, running free, in a wild and warm place. It was a time I'll never forget. It was truly magical...

And here I was, on this immaculate beach, under a shining, golden sun, with salty sea breezes tickling at my nose, and I was surrounded by beautiful women in bikinis, smoking hot Euro babes frolicking, splashing in the waters, lying atop the beige sands. The beautiful girls everywhere, far as the eye could see.

I scanned around, admired the scenery. It was further up the beach, a little past South Beach, around 30th and Collins, and it was way less crowded and was much cleaner there. No used condoms, empty bottles or bloody tampons anywhere.

Since it wasn't so crowded, I didn't need to cut through too many people to get to the water. I'd planned to set my towel down, kick off my flip flops and jump in the Atlantic, which, at that time of year, was a darker, more navy shade of blue.

Nearing the foamy, splashing tide, I passed by two sizzling hot, rail thin, young European goddesses. They were as pretty as runway models.

One was a blond, the other a brunette.

Passing them, they looked at me, and I looked back. I smiled at them. They smiled back.

I decided to seize the opportunity and asked them how the water was today.

They responded that they'd not been in, only had been sunbathing.

It was a rather effective opening line. I'd not even planned it, either. It just rolled off the tip of my tongue.

Not only were both stunningly beautiful, they were chill, friendly, easy to talk to. We hit it off, immediately began chatting, the usual getting to know you stuff, where are you from, what are you doing here, the small talk thing.

One of them was Italian. The other was Austrian. Sort of surprising because it looked the other way around, the Austrian the brunette and darker-skinned, with these big, mesmerizing brown eyes that captivated me. I'd never seen eyes like that before.

She was thin as a model, both were, actually, and both had their belly buttons pierced.

The Italian was a hot number herself, with bright blue eyes and a crooked smile that was sly and sexy.

I was hitting it off with the two of them, and then Nasdaq arrived.

He made his introductions, caught up on our banter. The girls had to go to class and had to leave shortly, so I made sure to get their digits and asked them to meet me and Nasdaq for dinner later that night at a trendy bar/restaurant on Lincoln Road that had splendid margheritas and magnificent food, particularly its nachos.

Once the girls left, Nasdaq and I discussed the obvious. Who would chase who?

The two girls liked me, I could tell, and weren't too into Nasdaq. Poor Nasdaq. Not only was he shy, but he was slightly older than me, and slope-shouldered, not as physically fit. When we'd hit on girls, they'd usually like me more.

Nasdaq was indecisive. He couldn't say which one he liked better. I knew I wanted the Austrian. From the first moment I saw her, she was all I could think about, as if she'd cast a spell on me, with those brown eyes of hers...

Nasdaq and I met the girls at the restaurant at around 7pm. We had a fun time, yummy Latin fusion food and several drinks.

After the meal, we took a leisurely walk around Lincoln Road. The place was packed, young people, pretty people, weirdos, hipsters, posers, artists, models, buskers, human statues, beggars, and stragglers and everything in between. We even passed by a guy who looked like Mickey Rourke, and I'm pretty sure it was him.

(I'd driven past Vanilla Ice earlier that day, seen him run a red light, not far from Lincoln Road. He'd been driving a white SUV. I would have expected him in some

fancier whip. Maybe Suge Knight stole his rides too... But still, I have thought he'd be cruising like Birdman, who I'd seen pimping a jet-black Rolls Royce. I spotted him driving down the street by my apartment, at 6 AM, when I was returning from a club. We'd made eye contact, as I'd stopped in my tracks, squinting at him, thinking, "Wait a sec, isn't that..." And he'd sped off before I could put respek on his name...)

Back to Lincoln Road, strolling around, we decided to hit a club on the beach, one I'd not been to, but one where Nasdaq knew a part-owner and so we bypassed the line, got in for free, had VIP access.

The whole time, on our double date, it wasn't totally clear who'd wind up with who. Poor Nasdaq, neither girl really was too keen on him.

Countless shots were slammed by our quartet. Nasdaq's owner pal hooked us up with an open bar. Then it was down to the dance floor.

The four of us began to boogie.

I first was shuffling, duckwalking with the Italian, and then duckwalked over to the Austrian.

There was something about her. An aura. It drew me in, like an energy with invisible tentacles, and I pulled her towards me, grabbing her by her slim hips and I planted my lips on hers.

I think we set a Guinness Record for how long we made out, on that dance floor. When we broke apart, and went to bumping and grinding, I glanced over at Nasdaq and the Italian, and they were staring at us, eyes bulging and mouths agape.

I'd have expected Nasdaq to take the cue, put the moves on the Italian. But he didn't. Poor guy was too beta, didn't have the guts.

We danced a bit more, had a few more drinks, and I invited the Austrian back to my place, for a horizontal dance or two.

But she refused, politely, told me she would see me tomorrow. To which I was okay with. Of course, I wanted her to come back to my apartment with me, but I

liked her enough and was a gentleman and wasn't such an animal I couldn't wait for one night.

I saw her the next night. We met again on Lincoln Road, had a lovely dinner, a romantic walk on the beach, a few drinks at a small café near my apartment, and ended up at my apartment, where we spent the night.

We immediately became inseparable, seeing each other daily. But we had trouble communicating at times. Her English was great, but she was more accustomed to the British English, British accent, as most in Europe are.

So there be a lot of things I'd say to her, especially slang words and such, that she'd have trouble getting. And she'd narrow her eyes, shoot me the cutest scrunched up face, shake or tilt her pretty head, her shoulder length brownish black hair swiveling and bobbing as she would ask "what?" With the most shocked and quizzical expression, like my slang word was an algebraic equation.

But she was clever. Picked up quickly on the language. And we got along great. She was easygoing, fun, open-minded. She didn't complain or start fights. The only red flag I noticed were a set of scars on her right thigh. Would I ever discover what a red flag that was... Would I ever wish I'd asked about that sooner!

She'd be so timid in bed and was unwilling to experiment- at first. I discovered why later. That it had to do with her being sexually attacked at age 12 and being unable to bring herself to engage fully with a man, let down her guard. She'd never confided that in anyone before. It'd been a secret she'd kept for years....

Once she told me about it, and as we got to know each other, she became more willing, open, and we did all sorts of things. Things I'd never done, either. It was bliss. Once, in bed, curled up warmly together in the dark, she whispered to me that I was the first person she'd ever really enjoyed being with, which made me feel like a lion...

We had this unbelievable month together. We'd eat great food, drink, hit the beach, swim, sunbathe, lie in the sun.

We'd dance. With a plethora of nightlife places, it was no problem to find a dancefloor in Miami or South Beach. And when we danced, we held each other

tightly. Deep eye contact. I'd get lost in the currents of her puppy dog brown eyes.

There was a night when we danced to The Cure song "Just Like Heaven," which came on again, at an opportune time. I'd never been a Cure fan, except that song, and had always been more into heavy metal, hardcore rap, but fuck if that wasn't one of the greatest, most moving pieces of music I'd ever heard. A song that seemed to follow me throughout this time in my life, prophetically.

It was like heaven, her soft body, slender frame in my arms, shaking and swaying to the music, the club's rainbow of lights, strobes illuminating us. Every time I hear that song, I'm transported back to that moment, that night. Amazing how music has that power, to function as a time machine.

But it ended, as all things do, when her visa expired, and her school term ended.

That last night, before she left, she told me how she never wanted the night to end, and neither did I. We had a gluttonous meal of seafood, drinks at a café, and a walk on the beach under the silver light of a full moon.

I remember us glancing up at the big white pill in the sky and her joking about how I shouldn't worry, that she "wouldn't turn into werewolf," and it so cute how she said that, with her big brown eyes and the sexy sound of her European accent.

She'd told me, too, that whenever there was a full moon that she'd have difficulty sleeping. We barely slept that night, anyway, spending the majority of the time in each other's arms.

The next morning when she left, though, the mood shifted, and we were both so sad. We held each other, crying, neither of us wanting to let go. I'd not cried like that since my father died.

Seeing her off to the airport shuttle van was excruciating. I ran back up to my apartment, wailed like a baby. Then I calmed myself by slugging a series of shots of whiskey... Later on that day, I met a Jamaican buddy of mine from the building, and we smoked a couple joints, which helped bring me back to life...

I kept up the long-distance thing, with the Austrian, for a couple months. Looking back at it, I had friends telling me to cut it off, what future did I have with her, et

cetera. I should have listened, probably. But, again, who knows where I'd be now, if this book would have been written.

The long-distance thing was tough, but I was still having fun, being young, living in South Beach. I was still hanging with Nasdaq, out drinking, hanging with a few of the Venezuelans, too, who I'd met through the thick chick, but I wasn't chasing tail.

Perhaps I should have. One of the Venezuelans, a thin, pretty young thing, around the same age as me, the Austrian, was interested in me, and I developed similar feelings for her.

She, unlike the Austrian, was no party girl. She was in fact a virgin. She'd never even had a boyfriend.

That surprised me, because with her soft and sexy South American accent, caramel skin, bulbous black eyes, and her thin figure, I'm sure she had plenty of suitors. Perhaps it was to do with her demeanor. She was leery of men. Her father had cheated on her mother, parents divorced, and this instilled her with a deep distrust of the male gender.

The other Venezuelans, one of the gay dudes tried to set me up with the virgin and attempted to assuage me of my longing for the Austrian.

He assured me there'd be "other ships" to board. I'd began having those thoughts, too, thinking how it would be impossible to make it work, with her in another continent, her a citizen of another country, her with no work experience past simple hotel work and waitressing.

I decided to go on a platonic date with the virgin, and I called her up, asked her out. She nervously, reluctantly accepted.

However, before we met, another hurricane, an inexplicable late season storm, approached Florida, quickly curtailing our plans!

Nasdaq and I evacuated, drove out to the west coast of Florida, which was in the lowest part of the dreaded "cone of probability." We loaded up our rides, and did a hurricane shuffle out there, staying in a cheap motel, on the beach in Fort Myers.

On the way there, we drove across the Florida peninsula, and, once outside the Miami, Ft. Lauderdale area, I got to see what a wasteland much of the interior of Florida really was.

Especially the barren, desolate lacuna between the coastlines. It was empty, ugly, brown, devoid of life and vegetation, fucking scorching hot. It was more reminiscent of the badlands of Wyoming or Death Valley than Florida- or at least what I knew of Florida.

We made a pitstop, somewhere in this dead space, at a Native American reservation.

I'd never been to a reservation. I'd seen them on TV, in movies. They never seemed too bad. Open lands, mountains, Wild Wild West western rustic American scenery.

But this place was depressing, plain depressing. It was run down, and the people looked run down too. When I pushed open my car door and exited my air-conditioned bubble, stepping into the blistering heat, I nearly fell down.

It had to be the hottest hot I'd experienced. Like a wave of lava hitting me as I opened that car door.

(The humidity, heat, already unbearable at times, worsens the further inland you venture into the Florida peninsula and is superlative when a hurricane approaches, as the barometric pressure drops.)

Wiping sweat from our brows, we gassed up our rides and ducked into the heavenly icy AC blast of the gas station restaurant and grabbed a fast food lunch.

Glancing around, I felt such empathy for the Natives. Here they were, their people massacred, land taken, their ancestors murdered, displaced by Andrew Jackson, Old Hickory strangling them with his bare hands, and now they were left with this patch of land in the worst, dreariest part of the state. On top of everything they'd suffered, having to live in a place like this was a serious kick to the dick, a gross indignity...

Eating a grilled cheese sandwich, seeing the signs on the wall proclaiming: "alcohol forbidden," and thinking of how, after the settlers of Florida massacred the Natives, alcohol, the poisonous potion, had launched its own onslaught and

ravaged these communities, so much so that it had to be banned outright. Shaking my head in dismay, I must say that all I wanted to do was get out of there as soon as possible.

At least I could.

Stepping back into my car, my black car, the steering wheel was like a burning flame, nearly melting off the flesh of my palms as I gripped it.

Gunning it out of that wasteland, those American Indian Cemeteries, and driving off, eventually arriving at the horizon of the west coast, witnessing its splendid tropical beauty emerging into my windshield, it was as if the land in front of me were an oasis.

I found that the west coast of Florida, and Ft. Myers, where we'd gone, was less peopled and less developed than Miami. The water had a darker shade to it. But the sands on the beaches were whiter. The people were Whiter, too, and it was less Latin, but, like Florida's east coast, it had plenty of New Yorkers, Carpetbaggers like me, and we were accepted, people were friendly there.

Another pleasant aspect was that the drivers were less rude than in Miami, more adherent to traffic laws, not much tailgating and even cars allowing you to pass, allowing surprisingly wide berths, and there was far less worry of a passing motorist shooting you...

On the drive there, though, we witnessed the fury of Mother Nature, seeing a town, Punta Gorda, that'd been recently struck by a hurricane; the storm had spawned ferocious tornadoes that'd fucking leveled houses; the structures turned to scattered debris, and chunks of plywood, shredded furniture, obliterated drywall flanked trunks of palm trees that'd been flattened as if driven over by a bulldozer.

It was certainly an omen, a clear message who was in charge in the battle of man versus nature; nature, ultimately, always wins. The scenes we witnessed along that road, the town torn to bits, that storm's carnage, were irrefutable proof of nature's, Earth's supremacy over us...

The roadside motel we'd booked proudly proclaimed, on its front signage, that all rooms have "Color TV." In the lobby, which had a 1970s gestalt and faint smell of secondhand cigarette smoke, it was cold as an icebox. A blasting central AC vent hummed loudly from the ceiling.

A leathery lady with a cragged face checked us in, and, annoyingly, we had to share a room. Fortunately, there was one with twin beds, otherwise we'd have done rock-paper-scissors for the couch, floor, or bathtub.

The hotel was surprisingly full. Not with other east coast refugees, either, but with Europeans.

More Europeans! Florida was full of them. This time, though, no Austrians or Italians. It was Dutch and Germans. (The travel company that booked the Dutch and Germans together on the same tour group might have chosen more wisely. One Dutch Karen I mistook for a German flipped out on me at the breakfast buffet. Her face crimsoning, she was enraged I thought her to be German. That WW2 bad blood still hasn't died down totally, I guess...)

Though I was still "with" the Austrian, in a long-distance relationship, I wasn't quite sure we'd ever see each other again, and I happened upon a few more European lovelies.

Was it wrong to chase after women if in a relationship, long-distance or not? Yes, sure, but with a potentially catastrophic hurricane a possibility to hit us, inching closer on the radar every news day, I wasn't thinking much of tomorrow or of anyone on another continent who I might never see again. I was focused on the moment. Crappy of me, yes, but the swirling blob of death on the television was encroaching and disrupting my moral compass...

There were three of them, in that crew of European girls. Nasdaq and I met them at the breakfast buffet (and we fortunately didn't mistake them for Dutch, though I'm not sure if they'd have been offended as the Dutch Karen.)

One of them was a pretty brunette, with an hourglass figure, who looked a tad like a younger Shania Twain. Another was a model skinny blond, sporting a super cute, tight little ass, and the last was a gangly tall blond with a sharp face and big bird nose.

The brunette was the best looking of the three; she was nice, but shy, hard to pry from her shell.

The tall blond neither I nor Nasdaq had any interest in, but the shorter, skinny blond, with the ass, was hot, and outgoing, easy to talk with, though her English wasn't too great (and at the time my German vocabulary didn't exceed more than three words).

Like so many other occasions, I chased the wrong girl, and courted the more outgoing blond, leaving Nasdaq to try his luck with the brunette, with whom he'd taken a fancy.

Like I said, it was a crappy thing to do, and I guess I'm a bad guy for pursuing the blond, since I technically had a girlfriend, but I wasn't convinced I'd see her again, although she'd been talking of coming back to spend Christmas with me.

With that storm approaching, we were receiving daily doses of fear and paranoia from the news. Every day, newscasters in suits and smug smirks would update us on the progression of the hurricane, throwing their arms up at the screen, bestowing the terrifying multi-colored mass, the swirling harbinger, the creeping blob of death on the radar.

The news would often then show looped video footage of hurricane destruction. The storm being a most unwelcome houseguest, totaling Caribbean islands, causing biblical floods; the blustery beast raging, ripping roofs off buildings, and flinging cars in the air like an angry child throwing toys. Every day, we'd flip on our Color TV and, gasping and awing, we'd watch the storm, with its whirling winds of devastation, hurtling towards our Florida peninsula. The storm stalking us like a deranged serial killer.

And I'll admit that, if these were my final days, I was seeking the company of a beautiful young woman.

The blond and I spent a lot of time together, walking on the beach, talking. But when I worked up the nerve to kiss her, us standing side by side on the beach, under a drizzly, windy, starless sky, as I went in, she turned her cheek, rejected my advance, and suddenly told me that she had a boyfriend and rushed off back to her room.

That one hurt. Not only had I betrayed my long-distance girlfriend, I'd also gotten rejected trying. It was like a sword cutting me with both edges. A real punch in the gut. That sinking feeling of rejection spiked over me, and I felt like a walking pile of shit.

Alone, I ambled on the beach for a little while longer, trying to clear my head of my lamentable actions. But the rain picked up noticeably and the wind began to roar. Peering out at the dark waters of the nighttime sea, the swirling water black as ink, I saw the Gulf of Mexico's waves cresting and crashing violently at an eroding shore, which appeared somehow both magnificent and raw.

Even though I'm agnostic, whenever something really scary transpires, I find myself praying to God. I don't know why. Force of habit, maybe.

I was praying to God the storm didn't lash us too badly. The storm surge from those waters wouldn't be pretty. I didn't trust that our cheap hotel would stand up to the force of those waves. And those images of that devastated town we'd passed by were flickering in my mind, making me feel queasy, but at least the greater scheme of death and destruction alleviated the guilt and dejection related to my girl problems.

I stomped through the wet, heavy sand, back to the room, squinting and pursing my lips because the howling wind was whipping sand at my face. The grains of sands were smacking at me so hard they felt like tiny shards of glass.

Trudging back through those nasty winds of the upcoming storm, I have to say I was still slightly disheartened by getting rejected so blatantly by the blond. We'd spent the day together, talked, gotten to know one another, had a romantic dinner, and all of a sudden, out of nowhere, she turns out to have a boyfriend?! I wish she'd mentioned it earlier. Maybe she just wanted a free meal? Maybe she didn't like me enough to be physical with me? Maybe she was a virgin? Maybe she wanted a more casual, friendship thing? Who knows... Not that it matters much, in retrospect.

But I'll admit that immediately after the blond darted off, after my failed smooch, I teared up. I didn't shed any tears or break down crying. But I did feel barbs of sadness run through me, and my eyes did get watery. I don't know why I reacted

like that, so strongly. I'd only just met her. Perhaps it's because that was the first time a girl had flat out refused my try at kissing her. It was a sting to my psyche.

It may have also been that I projected the Austrian onto her. They were both young skinny pretty German-speaking European girls. Maybe it was like the blond was a substitute for my geographically distant girlfriend, and her walking away reignited my recent emotional pain...

I collected myself and walked it off, but, as I mentioned, I decided to retire for the night earlier than expected because of the deteriorating weather conditions. All I wanted then was a warm shower to wash the sand from my hair and face and to lie down and relax, drink a few beers.

Stepping back into the room, I pulled the door closed and mopped a shaky hand over my windswept face. Then I swung around and found Nasdaq seated by his lonesome, slumped in a chair, nursing a beer and watching the hurricane on the Color TV. Turns out Nasdaq had had no luck. He'd been hanging out much of the evening with the brunette and the bird nose and said he couldn't separate them, attempt his Casanova ways with the brunette.

We drank a few beers, laughed it off, but both of us, inside, were disappointed, I think. And things only got worse when we saw on the news that the hurricane, which had appeared, in the "cone of probability," to be more likely to hit Miami, had taken a sharp turn. It was now barreling straight towards us! Our attempt at escaping it, just like our Casanova attempts on the Germans, were futile. In vain.

We were sitting ducks. The storm was about to smack us directly. Not to mention our cheaply priced and cheaply built hotel was only about a block from the beach...

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Fortunately for us, the hurricane took another turn, slightly farther up the coast, sparing us the brunt of its damage. We were still lashed with high winds, but nothing catastrophic.

Miami was also spared much damage, and we returned to South Beach shortly after the storm had passed.

It's a grim calculus with hurricanes, studying the radar, prognosticating about the cone of probability. Of course, you want it to pass you, your town, city. But when it does, and it goes farther south, north, east, west, then it smacks someone else. It's like a hot potato, a live grenade, that moving mass of death, that mass of wind and chaos, that evil blob of swirling green and red and purple on the radar, lurking in every television. Major hurricanes in Miami get higher ratings than the Super Bowl.

There are two things fun about hurricanes, though.

The first is watching those idiot reporters on the street standing in the winds, hanging on to poles, being walloped by the high winds and rains. Nothing funnier and more enjoyable than that. Not that I don't appreciate the media and the warnings, crucial info they provide about storms. If only those poor souls in Lake Okeechobee in 1928 had been warned.

Still, though, with what sanctimonious jerkoffs many news reporters are, what vultures, bloodthirsty vampires seeking ratings and sensationalism, it's funny, in a gallows humor way, to see them suffer, stand outside, flailing like crash dummies in those storms...

Another thing enjoyable about hurricanes is getting off work or school. For what "snow days" are to the North, hurricane days can be for Florida, no work, no school.

Although it's horrific if the hurricane really does hit you full force. Being out of power, water, eating canned food, the flooding of entire residential areas, and that's assuming you're lucky enough that the storm didn't swallow your house in its gusty mouth of death.

Hurricanes absolutely suck.

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When I got back to South Beach, following the storm, I began, with no help of my school, an internship I'd scored at a music label in South Beach.

The label had big name stars, mostly in the Latin music market, and, for a time, we had Pitbull signed to us.

Pitbull, then, was only big in Miami, relatively unknown in the rest of the country, let alone the world.

I met him once, found him to be a quiet, friendly guy. When he blew up, became a superstar, went from “Mr. 305” to “Mr. Worldwide,” I couldn’t have been happier for him. A local boy made good. Everyone I know who knows him, or has worked with him, only has positive things to say about him.

There was a comedy sketch show I saw not long ago, parodying him. Skewering him for being a douchebag. Nothing could be farther from the truth. He’s a kind soul, has done numerous works of charity for his community, and has established charter schools, helped greatly improve the quality of education in Miami.

Fuck you, Alternatino, and fuck you, Arturo Castro! Yes, the Pitbull douchebag skit was clever and funny, and Pitbull himself, being a chill dude, having a sense of humor, probably laughed at it. But, in honesty, it couldn’t be farther from an accurate depiction of the man...

Back to the label. That label was full of dramatic people, crazy incidents. Working there as an intern, I saw how the music business worked, from the inside, not just in books and secondhand stories. I saw it up close.

There was a guy I worked with there, another intern, called Hamlet, who I became friends with. We’d usually be assigned to work together on various gopher, intern type tasks...

Hamlet was a rosy-cheeked, slender, tall and handsome young man, nearing college graduation.

As a youngster he’d taken an interest in the performing arts, in acting, and he’d performed in local theater groups and went on to appear in a handful of television commercials airing in the Miami area.

Told he resembled a young Ashton Kutcher, a local casting agent signed him and scored him some modeling work for a local restaurant and clothing store and a gig as a dancing extra in the background of a Spanish language variety show, clapping his hands and smiling and laughing on command.

The aspiring actor/model split his time between acting/modeling auditions and gigs, bar jobs, and college classes at FIU and interning at the record label.

Hamlet had taken the internship eager to soak up its perks. Such as free entry to nightclub VIP sections, free concert tickets, and meeting famous people and getting free CDs and merch. Like me, he'd also thought of maybe using the connections from the record label to make further contacts in showbiz.

His duties at the record label were like mine, and included much of the usual intern drudgery, like fetching coffee, xeroxing, answering phones.

While I'd be on the computer more, sending emails, completing and sending out expense reports, Hamlet was usually posted to the front desk, filling in for the secretary. I think the label heads liked having his pretty face perched out front...

At the front desk he'd not only answer calls, but register visitors, many of which were uninvited artists who'd show up to the front door of the label's office. These intruders would often barge in, immediately begin singing, dancing, rapping, strumming a guitar at Hamlet or whomever occupied the front desk or had just happened to be standing or sitting in the lobby. Our accounting department sometimes would have a mariachi band rush up to them, begin playing their guitars, accordions or whatever.

Such encounters could get weird and desperate and required dispatching security, who, sometimes with the assistance of label staff, sometimes me and Hamlet, literally dragged or pushed the aspiring artists into the street, their guitars and everything, them rapping and singing as the door slammed in their face.

It was pretty sad.

The aspiring artists would at times be in tears, too, attesting to having taken a bus for 10 hours. Claiming that they had no money for a return ticket.

But they'd always be told the same thing. Hire a manager and send us an official demo, registered mail.

I'd like to think our bosses or executives at the label were listening to the artists, gauging their talent, but I'm not sure they were. They seemed more annoyed by it than anything else.

I'd once heard that Puff Daddy listens to anyone who jumps up in front of him and starts rapping. I'm sure that happens a lot to him, that people pop up out of nowhere and rap to Puffy or yell and rap at him from a distance. Call his record label and rap into the phone when a secretary answers. And I say I know this, because this stuff happened to us...

(Our phones rang sometimes, with people singing at us when we'd answer...)

((Nowadays, artists can upload stuff to YouTube, become famous online without major label help, but back then, in the early to mid-2000s, that was less common. But I'm sure major labels still have tons of demos sent their way. Since, as cogs of media conglomerate machines, they function as gatekeepers, and do still control, dominate many media channels...)

Not every aspiring superstar showed up at our door or had a manager send their demo, though. Many demos came to us every day, mailed to the label, directly from the artists themselves. They'd often be crude home recordings, but sometimes were high quality, professional looking CDs, tapes, occasionally even vinyl, accompanied by press kits and merch.

Our label's official policy, such as that of many large, successful record companies, was not to listen to any "unsolicited" demo, that is, one sent directly by an artist and not a reputable manager, lawyer, or industry insider.

However, the label's A&R brass was always hungry for the next superstar who could emerge from nowhere. And we would in fact have any demo received via mail screened and any promising material forwarded to the head honchos for further review.

But screening these demos was no simple task. Thousands were received weekly. Huge piles stacking up in the corner of the low-level A&R execs' offices.

Such an undesirable task as screening those piles was often left to interns like Hamlet and me. It was tedious, extremely so, sorting through them, hearing endless hours of what resembled Tourette's syndrome sufferers and banshees and bathroom recordings with out of key singing (this was before auto-tune). There were animal sounds, horrid wannabe rappers and boy bands, and so on. Imagine the worst "American Idol" contestants, hearing that, again and again. That's what it was like, listening to many of those demos.

Only maybe one of fifty demos were at all decent. Only one of a hundred actually good.

After careful, painful screening, we'd filter the demos into two piles.

One pile being the "promising" pile that we'd forward to the head of A&R. The other being the "pass" pile that'd be destroyed, either by shredder or smashed up with a blunt object before being thrown into the garbage...

The head of A&R was a character worth mentioning. She was a bombastic, voluptuous Colombian lady, 30ish, with super high cheekbones and a shiny mane of silky waist length jet black hair. She wore black everything, every day, black pants, shirts, dresses, skirts, handbags, shoes, every article of clothing, every accoutrement, black. Black as her hair. And was she ever a looker. A bombshell. Like an actress from a telenovela.

Her sultry looks, however, masked her personality. She was a dragon. She had a fiery, explosive temper and was always involved in a dizzying array of telenovela-like blood feuds with everyone in every other department. Not only that, but she'd recently had a boyfriend up and disappear and everyone gossiped about it, suspected she'd murdered him.

Her looks and reputation made her unapproachable to most, but I did my best to keep on the vixen's good side, and she was always friendly with me. I think she appreciated that I wasn't scared of her and that I smiled at her...

As for the demos, and why they had to be destroyed, the vixen told me the reason for destroying them was simple. It was to avoid lawsuits. So no artist could claim they sent their song to the record label and then the label stole their music, later released it without their permission.

If somehow that did happen, coincidentally or otherwise (this being the music business!), the record label wanted no proof of the demo being in its possession. No evidence portending to that could exist.

So, again, here's where me and Hamlet came in. The label execs had been quite pleased with him and me. We were both hard-working, punctual, and polite. But most of all, we were both calm, patient. Hamlet was especially patient and mild-

mannered. I never once saw him get riled up about anything. The dude was the definition of stoic.

The weekly intrusions of aspiring artists bursting into the office, singing, dancing and rapping, didn't rattle him. Nor did the daily screaming matches between label executives that sometimes became physical; nothing got under the kid's skin.

I must admit, as a former musician, the desperation on the faces of those artists who'd barge into our offices, that disturbed me, visibly so. But Hamlet, never. He was cool as a cucumber. Always.

Of all the interns, his physique was the best, even better than mine; dude was an aspiring actor/model, after all, but, also his demeanor, of anyone, was the coolest. Because of his build, but probably more due to his steely resolve, I guess, A&R staff figured he'd be the perfect person to take on the undesirable task of destroying the unwanted demos.

(Most interns and lower level staff dreaded doing so, as it was mentally demoralizing and physically exhausting. Literally. Shattering those tapes and CDs. Smashing people's dreams to shreds. But Hamlet and I accepted the task with no complaints.)

Each week, he and I would take the rejected pile of CDs and tapes, in big black garbage bags, to the balcony outside the A&R office. There, we'd smash the demos up with a sledgehammer. The press kits and paper materials we'd then feed to the office document shredder. The mangled remains of the demos we'd sweep up, back into the garbage bags, and carry, drag out, like corpses in war, and toss ignominiously into the dumpsters in the alley behind the office building.

(I'd once darkly joked to Hamlet that I wished we could do the same to the musical intruders we'd have in our office. Like one of the rappers who'd barge in, rapping at everyone in the lobby. If we could bludgeon him into pieces with a sledgehammer, throw his remains out in the dumpster. Hamlet just grunted and nodded at that. I'm not sure if he'd been agreeing or not finding it funny. He did laugh when I joked that I thought the head of A&R had maybe chucked her boyfriend's remains, hidden in a pile of smashed up demos, out into the dumpsters...)

((We were either more merciful or less so than other labels, depending on one's viewpoint, in that we didn't send any rejection letters out for these destroyed demos. The only rejection letters we sent were for those demos that ascended a few levels in the label's hierarchy and ultimately failed to garner a contract offer.))

Of course, for me, smashing these demos caused me to think of my own music that I'd submitted to record labels. How they'd been destroyed. Shredded. And I wondered who the destroyer was, what they looked like doing that, which method of destruction did they use to murder my brainchild... My demos like aborted fetuses in the dumpster... Something I knew pain about too...

While it was usually Hamlet as the angel of musical death, I was dispatched to join several times, bashing demos.

I have to say, it felt better to be on the other end of the equation, lowering the hammer to the CDs and tapes. Beating and breaking them. Feeling the plastics crunch. Hearing them crack and pop. It was cathartic, in a sense. And when I brought down the hammer, I let it rip extra hard and in doing so released a lot of inner pain. My misery loving company.

(Although it'd bother me at times if I had to see the CD covers, the faces of the musicians when I whacked at their demos. I preferred to keep the CDs inside the garbage bags so they wouldn't make eye contact with me as I murdered them...)

Hamlet, though, the true quiet man, the man of few words, showed no emotion as he fed press kits into the shredder, or destroyed the CDs.

He'd have made a fabulous poker player, I thought.

There was one afternoon that Raya, a spunky college girl, another intern, an Indian American girl with big horse teeth and a long, crescent moon shaped face, sauntered out to the balcony where Hamlet and I were swinging at demos. Hamlet was using a hammer. I'd been provided a baseball bat. And we took turns whapping at the piles of demos inside the bags.

Raya had a painfully obvious crush on Hamlet and was always trying, unsuccessfully, to make conversation with him. Slipping in through the balcony's

open door, she smiled and asked us, half-jokingly, nervously giggling: “Doesn’t it bother you guys, doing that? Like, crushing all those people’s hopes and dreams?”

Hamlet, resting the hammer on his shoulder as he readied up another pile for the balcony of broken dreams, just shrugged, wordlessly.

She continued, her tone sobering, and she pointed a particular demo out; one that’d fallen from a garbage bag: “Oh, I like totally remember her. That girl called here the other day, crying and freaking out, saying she’d like sent us her baby photos, along with her demos. She was all begging us to mail them back to her.”

I peered down for a second at the demo in question, a cute teenage Puerto Rican girl in a pink halter top and black miniskirt, sticking her tongue out on the CD’s cover.

“I remember that,” I said. “The baby pictures had already been shredded. Lawsuits, you know...”

I’d been the one to shred the girl’s baby photos, not knowing, of course, that they were the only ones. I must say, I feel even worse about that one than I do about the water gun drive by, shooting that guy in the face with piss...

Maybe out of self-hate, I lined her CD up, singularly, and flipped it on its obverse side, which didn’t have any pictures, only a track listing. Then I cracked it with the aluminum bat three or four times, splitting the CD into a scattering of sharp plastic slivers. Then I swept its remnants up into a dustbin, dumped them into a garbage bag full of demos of the dead.

Raya glared at us both, noticeably put off by our apathy. After that, she didn’t talk much with either of us...

I don’t know what became of that baby picture girl, or the Raya girl, but I do know, through a friend of a friend, that Hamlet, like me, had given up on his initial childhood dream, his dream of being an actor, and later he’d become a high school drama teacher. I think his stoicism probably served him well in that role.

But I couldn’t be that stoic. It affected me, trashing those demos. But also working at that label, it wasn’t much fun. It was obvious that it was a sinking ship. You could feel it, in every corner of that office. People were leaving the label. Other

labels were going out of business or consolidating. The entire business model was in disarray.

The music business, at least that of traditional record sales, was in the toilet, thanks to online piracy. But, these days, circa 2020s, they have adjusted, somewhat, with the “360” deals, taking parts of an artist’s income from all sources, be they merchandise, live shows, licensing music.

So, really, just like in the past, with CDs, records, tapes, now with digital sales, streaming, the artists are still fucked. They’re always the ones to be burned, save for a few of the smart ones, especially some of the hip-hop guys like Jay Z, who’ve gotten business savvy, diversified, made tons of cash, and rightfully so.

But most musicians aren’t smart business-wise. They’ll always come up short.

Part of me thinks the digital implosion of the music business was a type of karma for the music industry. All the musicians that’d been exploited, extending their hands from the graves, as digital poltergeists, returning to wreak havoc on the industry that wronged them.

But it’s not a total zero-sum game. Many artists now are taking advantage of new platforms, social media, digital ways to spread their music, talents, and make a living, and some are even getting rich. Anyone now can release a record online, and if it sounds right, the artist has the right look, whatever, if it strikes the chords, it can take off, and superstars can still be born.

Justin Bieber was just a kid strumming his guitar and singing in his bedroom and was discovered on YouTube. Now he’s a megastar. It’s incredible that can happen nowadays and would have been inconceivable 20 years ago. Aspiring artists don’t have to burst into record labels’ offices or send out demos that might wind up in a dumpster. They don’t need to rent an expensive studio and can make professional sounding music on a home computer.

It’s both an exciting and horrific time for musicians. But I guess it’s always been like that, to some extent.

It’s saturated, the landscape. And there might not ever be another Madonna or Michael Jackson. MTV is done as a kingmaker in music. But new music, new stars

will always find us, some way or another. Music will always exist in one form or another. It'll never be stopped. Music will always be with us.

Like a graffiti mural I saw once in Miami, which read, in squiggly letters, "Will there be music in dark times? Yes, and it will be music about the dark times..."

And while I don't like much of the new music I hear, especially a lot of mumble rap and auto-tune stuff, I can recognize that that's largely because I'm older. When you stop liking a lot of the new music, it's often because you're getting old. And that's okay. It's Gen Z, or whatever the marketers want to call them, it's their time. I accept that. I pity the older folks who can't.

I was happy to have gotten my music out to tons of people all over the world. I didn't become a rock star, but I did get heard. Think of the millions in their garages and crappy bars whose music never got beyond their immediate friend circle or hometown.

And seeing from the inside how the music business worked, how scummy and fake a lot of the people in it were, how our label execs would always wear these fake smiles, kiss artists' asses, and then talk trash about them behind their backs, rip them off, how this is the way most of showbiz works, the schmooziness of it, it turned me off. And I lost my desire to be a part of it.

And that's also okay.

I remained hugely into music, always listening to music, on my phone, computer, wherever, always listening to new groups, old favorites.

(Still spontaneously dancing at times, when no one is around...)

And while I got out of the idea of making music or participating in the industry, I started focusing on what I did need, especially as a recent college grad, and especially with no jobs available at that record label or many others. I started focusing on money. Needing it. Wanting it. I also became increasingly focused on finance, financial markets, the stock market, futures and commodities, and I decided to change career paths, find my way into a job in financial services.

Little did I know that I'd again be hoodwinked and find myself in a place I never knew existed. A boiler room...

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South Florida is full of boiler rooms. But I knew little about them. Unfortunately, I'd not seen the eponymous film or perhaps I'd been better prepared. Being a naïve, fresh college graduate, I didn't know what I was diving into when I answered a newspaper job ad for a financial services company seeking salespeople. I had a whole different idea in mind when I put on a suit and tie and drove out to the office for an interview.

I was thinking I'd be in a palatial office building overlooking a lake or a causeway, watching boats cruise by, because it was Miami, after all, so when I got to a nondescript strip mall, with a couple empty storefronts, a liquor store and a Chinese restaurant, I was taken aback.

The company was next to the Chinese restaurant and one could smell and hear the crackle of cooking oil outside the office's front door, which was tinted dark black and locked (you had to be buzzed in).

When the door unclicked, and I walked inside, I found the place way more basic and understated than I expected. Just a small, cramped office space, with rows of tables, lined up closely together, in three long horizontal rows, all with phones, stacks of white papers and guys (only one or two women were there) yelling into headsets. The way they moved, heads bobbing like pigeons, and how animated they were with those mechanical mouthpieces, they were something akin to angry robots. A few looked happy, jovial, their lips twisted into smiles, but most of them had bitter, twisted faces, sinking eyes.

No one acknowledged me as I stepped in. They seemed possessed, all lips and teeth, speaking in sales tongues. One or two eyed me suspiciously, with upturned lips, but most stayed affixed to their headset, ignored my presence.

The whole room was so alive with their chatter. It was almost deafening, the humming din of voices in their various stages of plea.

At the front of the room were a couple 60-inch flat screen TV sets tuned to CNBC and Bloomberg, and on the far end of the room were three small closet-sized

offices that housed the bosses, next to those offices was a two car-length mini-meeting room.

I wandered like a lost puppy dog, not sure where to go or who to talk to. I certainly didn't want to interrupt any of the chattering phone people. Fortunately, I spotted a man in the corner of the room, in the threshold of one of the offices, waving me over, as if I were a truck backing up into a parking lot.

The man, Rocky, one of the bosses, was a loudmouthed New Yorker, from Staten Island. He was a short, stocky, Italian American man, about 30 something, wearing a stylish gray pin-striped Armani suit, Armani belt and alligator skin wingtips. I noticed he wore a lot of gold- a chunky gold chain necklace with a gold crucifix, a shiny gold watch, and several gold rings on both of his big meaty hands.

He shook my hand, with a very firm, clammy shake, and had me sit down across from him at his smallish desk (that was empty, save for a stack of papers and a black office phone).

He leaned into his black leather swivel chair and smiled, smugly, at me, his face full of white teeth. He skimmed over my resume for a few seconds, and then lifted his intense blue eyes, locked them to mine, and posed to me an unexpectedly philosophical question.

"So, if I gave you a shovel, and told youse to shovel a big pile of shit, every day, for a year, and at the end of that year, you'd get \$1 million, would you do it?"

I was slightly flabbergasted by his question. I wanted to jokingly ask if this would be my job, shoveling shit, because I thought I was here to interview for a sales job in finance. But I caught on quickly to his angle. He was gauging my drive. Would I go above and beyond, shovel shit if it meant becoming rich... He wanted to know just how money hungry I was.

Bills mounting up after doing an unpaid internship, I was becoming very money hungry.

I told him I would shovel that pile of shit, and I likely would have shoveled that shit, in the balmy Florida heat, for that sort of cash.

He nodded and his grin and white teeth grew larger. Then he reached his meaty gold hand for mine, again, and offered me a job. I was to start immediately.

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The company was pushing foreign currency investments, mainly selling stakes in euros. Every agent was to cold call numbers off a “lead sheet,” a list that had only the prospective client’s name and phone number. If or when they answered, we read off a script, and the script seemed to be about scaring the people more than anything.

The script was all about how the price of oil would skyrocket because of more cars on the road in China and events in the Middle East and how this would cause the dollar to lose value and the euro to appreciate in value.

That was the script, at least, I got, the first few days. There were other scripts saying the opposite, that the dollar would go up and the euro or the yen would go down. You never knew which script you’d receive when you arrived to work; you’d only hope that people would answer the phone and that they’d talk to you and not just hang up or curse you out, because that’s what most of them did.

There were also people who liked to fuck with us, string us along, let us read off the script and then make a joke or say something outlandish, like they were the police or an alien or a ghost or their house was on fire or something.

It was terrible work, I must say, and I knew quickly I wouldn’t stay with it for long, but as a fresh college grad with little full-time work experience, only part-time jobs and internship experience, there weren’t many jobs available. It was quite the conundrum. Employers wanted applicants with job experience but if you couldn’t find a job in the first place, how could you have work experience? It sucked. Hence, I wound up in a phone room.

(Again, I thought back to my online gigs, and music, thinking that I really should have ripped off a social media idea like Zuckerberg did, instead of being Crack Whore Lewinsky...)

The job ad didn’t mention telemarketing. But that’s what we were doing. We were glorified telemarketers, cold-calling people. I realized it my first day, sitting there, at that desk.

It was humbling, doing that job, being on the other side of the phone. I'd usually just hung up on telemarketers, and there was the one vacuum cleaner salesman I'd cursed out while I'd been tripping on acid. Now it was me being cursed out by people. And with how enraged many of the folks I called sounded, I didn't know if they were tripping on acid or just mad, but they didn't appreciate me either way.

The few people who'd talk to us often were old people. They were senile and lonely. Probably didn't get out much. It was sad that they were the only people who'd be nice and wouldn't curse us out, but sometimes they did. The Canadians we called, too, were quite polite. They'd rarely rage at us. Just graciously decline.

My coworkers there were a motley crew. Some real weirdos and misfits. Most were young loudmouth carpet baggers like Rocky, the Staten Island guy, but weren't dressed as well, wearing tacky suits, clip-on ties. Some were old men with orangish skin, toupees, and fake teeth. Many were real ra-ra types, yelling into the phones, amped up, high-fiving when they'd make a sale or kicking a trash can if they lost out. Most of them smoked cigarettes, and there'd be dudes in the stalls snorting coke during breaks (these were the people that bouncer from the club was angry with, I bet).

Worst part about the job was that it didn't pay a salary, only "draw" which is where you get paid a small sum, like \$1000 per month, but it's an advance on your future earnings. So when you do make sales, and earn commissions, that money will then be "drawn" from those earnings, sort of like a loan or advance. So, really, it was commission only sales work.

Not that I didn't notice how awful it was from the start, and I thought I could handle it for a short time and then move on to a better job in financial services, at a real company, with a position that had growth potential and allowed me to genuinely help clients as well as help the company profit.

(Something I'd noticed right off the bat with the boiler room was how they never talked of making their clients any money. It was always about themselves. Every agent bragging about their commissions. Soon enough, I saw that they were burning through these people. Losing all the clients' money and going on to the next victim. The agents at the company even referring to the people on the phone number lists as "bastards" or "pikers" if they wouldn't buy anything.)

It was gross, at that place, seeing the ugliest form of American capitalism and the worst of greed and human behavior. I'd been there for only a week and started to have nauseating premonitions, feeling something was amiss. I again searched online into the history of the company and found, buried deep, deep in the company's paperwork, that they'd changed their name.

When I searched for the previous name, I almost fell from my chair when I saw that they'd been under investigation for sales fraud, that they'd churned and burned their clients to the tune of over \$14 million in losses and the head of the company, who I'd never seen before, was likely to be indicted, and his whereabouts were unknown. (It was believed he'd run off to South America... Maybe was with the cop I used to buy drugs from!)

I quit that job then and there. In fact, I didn't even call them. I just stopped going in. I ghosted the fucks. I know it was cowardly, in a sense, not to tell them, but after they'd neglected to enlighten me that they were under investigation for sales fraud, and, worse yet, had been perpetrating sales fraud, I didn't feel I owed them any explanations.

I didn't want anything to do with such an operation and I certainly didn't want their name on my resume, either.

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It was around this time, too, that I quit the job, that my Austrian girlfriend returned to Miami.

I didn't think she would come back. We'd been doing the long-distance thing, talking online, but I wasn't sure I'd really see her again. To my shock, she told me she was coming over to spend Christmas with me, and only days later, she came!

I was stunned when she arrived at the airport. I just didn't think she'd do it, come back, and here she was, like a living ghost...

But it was great. Really great. We spent a blissful Christmas together. It was such a wonderful time. We picked up right where we left off. She was the same girl, so pretty, so laidback and fun, so up for anything.

And, again, we'd do anything and everything. We'd go out dancing. We'd swim in the ocean. We'd laugh, wrestle, and I'd bite her, chewing and sucking on her milky white, silky soft scrumptious skin, giving her hickeys everywhere. We'd give each other massages and cook massive meals, and she'd whip up these delectable Austrian cakes. I remember we ate this delightful gingerbread house, I'd bought, in bed, while we watched Christmas movies.

Then, at night, we'd take these fantastic, leisurely long strolls on the beach, under swaying palm trees that'd been wrapped in glittering Christmas lights. Sometimes we'd find freshly fallen coconuts lying around, scoop them up, and bring them back to our apartment, crack them open, and concoct mixed drinks from the coconut water and pulp and long pours of red rum.

It was such a perfect time, that holiday, like a dream.

I'd usually hated Christmas, gotten depressed around that time, because my family didn't do much for it, while other families did, and the TV was filled with annoying ads, consumerism, and fake cheer. Usually it was a time I reviled. It'd remind me, too, of Jessica, since Christmas time was when we'd first been together. But this Christmas, however, was perfect. So much so, it obliterated the associations, lent me a new appreciation for the holiday, seeing what it could be...

But after the holiday was finished, I didn't know what to do.

First of all, I had no job and dwindling savings. I was having trouble, too, finding any job in Miami because my Spanish was crap, and I wasn't keen to move to another city, leave my friends and everything I knew.

Second of all, my girlfriend was only in America on a tourist visa. She couldn't get work. She couldn't do much of anything except stay with me, which was cool, but money was running short.

I kept applying to jobs, but still was finding nothing. So my first problem wasn't disappearing, and things were only getting tighter financially.

My mother, relatives were becoming annoyed with me, too, yelling at me on the phone, berating me just to take any job, even as a janitor, just do something, they said.

This was the first time I'd really considered committing a crime, like robbing a bank or returning to drug sales. Drug sales would have been easy to enter, as this was Miami, after all, though it wasn't the business I'd envisioned. Basically, all the jobs I could find were commission only sales gigs, or crappy, high-pressure sales jobs, shady real estate sales, and one awful company I interviewed with who'd misrepresented themselves as a marketing company but were actually a door-to-door sales firm, schlepping around to businesses in South Florida, cajoling better rates for credit card processing.

(I remember before the interview, I was to "tag along" with a salesman as he "visited clients." It turned out to be this eccentric young German guy, going to these small businesses around West Palm Beach, many of which were run by elderly Jews. And this guy, with his crystal blue eyes and fascist style haircut, and his German accent, as could be expected, received the iciest reception imaginable. Not exactly the cleverest marketing, that, and I remember one lady specifically telling the German guy that she "wouldn't want his job, all the people around her strip mall, annoyed at him, and stink-eying him." Funny enough, I was thinking the same thing.)

It was time to rethink the South Beach dream. I was also becoming more interested in Europe, after being with this Austrian girl, seeing pictures of the jaw-dropping jagged spires of the Alps and bucolic countryside scenery of the Austrian hills, how lush and green they were, with those adorable slanted roof wooden houses, the whole place looking like "The Sound of Music" or a Christmas card.

I'd been looking into it, and the only way I could have a future with this girl, who I'd begun to fall deeply, deeply in love with and never wanted to part from, the only way to stay with her would be to marry.

And after a night of drinking and smoking weed, I made a hasty, crazy decision. While in bed, us both naked, I popped the question, asked my girlfriend to marry me.

To my surprise, she said yes, with no hesitation. The next day, us both in t-shirts and shorts, we went to the courthouse, paid a nominal fee, stepped in front of a county clerk, an attractive middle-aged Colombian lady wearing a heavy gold crucifix, who smiled at us, deviously, the whole time, and me and the Austrian,

like the young fools we were, rushed in and eloped, diving head first into matrimony...

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Stepping out of that courthouse was awkward. Neither of us knew quite what to say. It was impulsive, crazy, and hasty, but that's what people do when they're young and drunk on love.

(When we called our family members later, none were surprised. Her family was okay with it, but my Jewish relatives, I could tell, hated it, hated her, but didn't raise any objections, only a couple made snarky remarks... Not that I cared, though, because it didn't matter to me where she was from, and I was an adult, on my own, anyway. I wasn't living for them. I was living for me. I was living for my wife... Though we'd eloped, we'd planned to later have a formal ceremony, and if my relatives didn't want to attend, that was their decision. I'd always had an estranged relationship with my family, and I wasn't going to let people I barely knew control my decisions, though, later, I'd find that perhaps I should have listened to them more... At least in this instance...)

Back to eloping, you might think that we went out for a special dinner afterwards. Nope. We went back to my apartment and had a simple pasta dinner. We were too broke at the time to afford a fancy feast.

It was okay, though. We had simple tastes, and a casual meal at home satiated us both. Lying in bed, sipping gin, watching gameshows, was fine by us. Not a terrible way to spend a honeymoon. Besides, we were already in South Beach, a place where many would come anyway to have their honeymoon.

Now the issue of finances became more pressing, as did immigration concerns. We came to discover that marrying wouldn't alleviate our visa issues. It was, certainly, a giant leap. But it was really just the first bureaucratic hurdle of many that would present themselves.

In looking at our immigration options, both for America and Europe, I came to see the brutal truth of immigration policies the world over. Just how racist,

xenophobic many were, but, more so, like so many issues, the biggest thing it came down to was cash. Cold hard cash.

Immigration policies are kindest to two classes of people. The first is the migrant worker, or the asylum seeker, refugee, the desperately poor, not so much out of pure altruism. But also because this is a person who will happily perform the most menial tasks, the jobs of janitors, slaughterhouse workers, construction workers, landscapers, maids, et cetera. Jobs that citizens of a rich, industrialized country generally don't wish to do.

(A striking example of this is the oil-rich Gulf countries, Qatar, et al, where virtually none of the locals work and every job, especially lower wage, lower status jobs, are done by migrant workers from the Philippines, Sri Lanka, et cetera...)

The second beneficiary of immigration policies, who, by far, has it the easiest, is the person on the polar opposite side of the economic strata. The ultra-rich. Upper-caste businesspeople and their ilk. Those who can outright purchase visas, purchase passports and citizenships. People like billionaire Eduardo Saverin, the Facebook co-founder, who renounced his U.S. citizenship in 2012, became a resident of Singapore, and is now, according to Forbes, the island-nation's richest person.

(Again, why was I being Crack Whore Lewinsky? I wish I'd known Eduardo and Mark, and could have joined them in their dorm room hobby turned behemoth tech company... I could have immigrated anywhere with such ease... To Singapore, Austria, nearly anywhere...)

For such rich people, Billionaire Facebook Boy, expatriating is no hassle. They can pay the lawyer fees, buy property and investments, easily secure necessary documents to move internationally.

However, for everyone in the middle, everyone not desperately poor or stinking rich, immigration is often a bureaucratic labyrinth. One hurdle after another, though some countries make it easier than others, and the most restrictive countries, whether due to overpopulation, racism, xenophobia, protectionism, or whatever, make it damn near impossible, for anyone, even the well-heeled.

America, the “nation of immigrants” has gone through various periods of opening and closing, making immigration easier or harder.

(When my relatives first arrived in America, from Russia, they simply jumped off the boat and walked in... Different times for sure... Although, in essence, that’s what Facebook Boy did in Singapore...)

Unfortunately, in Miami, it was especially difficult for anyone not Cuban (due to the “Wet Foot, Dry Foot” policy) to even get a green card, let alone citizenship. My wife and I had originally wished to remain in Miami, at least for a while, and had applied for her green card, spent \$1000 on it. But we were told, due to the office there being so backlogged, that it would take over a year to just arrange an interview for the green card. Let alone receive it.

While we waited, I still was having no luck finding work, though she found part-time work at a hotel that was likely a front for drug money. I mean, this was Miami, South Beach, after all. “Magic City,” a place built, literally, on drug proceeds, predominantly cocaine revenue.

(I’d highly recommend the documentary “Cocaine Cowboys” for further narrative on that subject...)

But yeah, the hotel my wife worked at had few guests. But it did have a steady stream of shady characters flowing in and out of the French owner’s back office. The owner, fine with hiring illegals, mostly his fellow Europeans, mostly young attractive ladies, was a heavily tattooed middle-aged man, muscled up, with a French face, big hook nose and a glinty set of gold teeth.

My wife saw that he had a machine gun in his office. And spotted a massive bag of coke in one of his desk drawers, as well as duffel bags of cash in the hotel safe. So, yeah, pretty safe to say there was funny business. Although, for Miami, South Beach, it was standard operating procedure.

What was cool about her working there was all the free stuff she got. Because of the bags of money the place was raking in, the hotel awash in dirty cash, they didn’t care too much about the inventory in the restaurant and turned a blind eye, or didn’t notice that employees were plundering food, bottles of liquor, cigars. We saved a ton of cash surviving on free food from the hotel. It really got us through a tough few months; time I spent seeking work, doing part-time online

page design and marketing gigs, online back office tasks, so we could make ends meet.

But still, things were getting rough, and it was becoming quite evident that I wouldn't find steady work in Miami. I didn't have much work experience, either, so I wasn't thinking that I'd find a better situation elsewhere.

My wife's family had a plant nursery business and were interested in growing marijuana, which I'd done briefly with a friend in high school. We'd grown a couple small plants in his closet. I was interested in getting into the marijuana business, although it was officially illegal in Austria. However, there were loopholes in the law that made it legal to possess plants and produce seeds, certain derivatives.

I'd also been studying German and was becoming more infatuated with the idea of going to Europe. I'd been to Britain, as a kid, to visit my aunt, but I'd not been to continental Europe and desperately wanted to go.

(It was a hoot, learning German, when I first started. It sounded so funny, making those sounds, especially the fronted vowels, umlauts. My favorites were the words "fünf," German for five, which sounded absolutely hilarious to me. As did "entshuldigung," which means "excuse me." I'd yell "entshuldigung" at my wife in our apartment, saying it loudly, saying it as much as I could. German, I found, to be a fantastically expressive, powerful language, perfect for yelling and cursing.)

((I think the best part of learning any foreign language is learning the curse words, dirty words, how to insult people. Learning the words for genitalia is tremendous too. It's almost like when you learn to say "vagina" or "penis" in another language, you rediscover it, like it's a whole new thing...))

We started talking more seriously about going to Europe, especially since my wife was becoming a little homesick too. We decided that it was the perfect time. We were young, and although we were broke, we weren't tied down with debt or a house or kids. It was settled. We'd go. Head out to Europe, head over to Austria, together, and see what we'd find there.

I experienced different emotions about moving to Austria.

First was elation. I was excited, giddy to visit another continent.

But then I was sad. Depressed to leave South Beach, where I'd loved the beach, the weather, had friends and had experienced many of the best moments of my life. It was the definitive end of my Miami music business dream. The end of my South Beach dream. The opportunities just weren't there for me. I could have persisted, I guess, but I began to shift to other ideas and dreams. I'd changed. And I'd become excited again and fascinated with the world beyond America's borders.

Sure, South Beach, Miami, are more like Latin America than America, but it still was America. I've always been curious about other countries, people, cultures and languages. America, to me, is like a bubble, in a way. We're so closed off from the rest of the world.

Our media never talks about other countries unless it's about an adversary, a war, or a natural disaster. One might think that's all the rest of the world is, a big festering shithole, replete with war and terrorism and misery. And sure, that is tragically the case, for many, but not for all. In fact, I was shocked to learn of the high quality of life in Europe.

Hearing of how they had free health care, dental care, income assistance, little to no violent crime was startling to learn about. Many of the far right-wing assholes and Fox News Channel people would have you believe Europe is suffering under "socialism" and how terrible it is there.

In talking with my wife and through my own research into relocating to Austria, I discovered that to not be the truth. I discovered they had cleaner air, cleaner water, safer roads, and far happier people. They all had health insurance. That was free. They had up to two months of vacation. Paid. Not the two weeks most Americans are lucky to get. Most of their citizens weren't drowning in debt. Quite the contrary, Europeans traveled the world, spoke multiple languages, read more books than us. Book discussion shows were popular on TV, and their news programs actually had news instead of partisan shit-tossing, yelling, and flashy graphics.

It was saddening to discover how much I'd been lied to, as an American. How our media is so dishonest. How much they'd brainwashed us into thinking we were the greatest country on Earth and how shitty Europe is when nothing could be farther from the truth, in so many ways.

And there are problems in Europe, sure, and advantages in America, especially with starting businesses, investing, but the equality and overall quality of life, the better opportunities for free education, health care, and public transportation and how much less violent crime there was because of the better social services and safety nets, it was astonishing. Simply learning what I did invalidated nearly everything every right-winger Fox News person had said about social welfare and free education...

(I was seeing why it was, too, they didn't want better education. In that otherwise a better-educated populace wouldn't vote for most Democrats and Republicans...)

((I came to realize, too that both sides, Left and Right, Red and Blue, are filled with crooked politicians that are simply pawns, puppets for corporate interests, and neither side really cares and they both exploit racism, religion, and greed to keep the masses below them. The same corporate interests spew partisan bullshit on MSNBC and Fox News to divide Americans, pit us against each other, make us easier to control. It's quite tragic how they manipulate us, dumb us down. And it's being done, by both parties, I believe, for reasons greater than we know...))

Back to planning the move to Europe, the problem in going over to Austria, as we prepared for our arrival, was that while the immigration procedures were an improvement from Miami's, they were still stringent.

Annoyingly, if we'd been married a year or two earlier, I could have had an Austrian passport with little hassle. However, I'm not the only foreigner who was impressed by the quality of life in Austria, and there'd been such a surge in sham marriages in Austria, involving immigrants seeking Austrian passports, so many sham marriages, in fact, that the government enacted draconian measures to eradicate the practice.

Laws were established that granted foreign spouses of Austrians only 1-year visas, though these could be used as work permits, and could be renewed. However,

before the visa was granted, much paperwork had to be filled out and income, bank statements provided.

There was also a requirement that all new immigrants had to wait up to 7 years before they could apply for citizenship. In order to receive citizenship, too, they'd need to pass a battery of German language tests.

While it was daunting, and disappointing, it was doable, and it didn't dissuade us from making the move...

The days before we moved were some of the best of my life. I sold my car, providing us enough cash to start up in Austria, buy plane tickets, and spend a couple months relaxing more on the beach. During this time, I studied German, which I'd been enjoying the intellectual challenge of, and my wife and me both worked part-time, her still at the hotel and me working freelance jobs, doing online marketing.

That time, those couple months, over the summer, were magical. Since we weren't working full-time, we had plenty of time to chill. And smoke weed. And drink. And lie out on the beach, swim in the wonderfully warm Atlantic waters. When the water is around 90 degrees Fahrenheit, it's like you're a lobster in there, moving, floating and swimming around in that thick hot and salty ocean. Oh, it was so glorious.

We spent a lot of time cooking too. We were living in this super tiny Art Deco building that'd been converted from a hotel into a condo. It was closet-sized, that studio apartment, that room, but it was cozy, and a block from the ocean. And we had a nice little kitchen in the corner of the room, with a stove, a range top, and we made all sorts of delectable dishes, lots of pancakes and fried chicken, lots of Latin food, along with the tasty treats and free food, croissants, and alcohol my wife was bringing home from the hotel.

I was hooking up with bags of decent Mexican weed from a chill Mexican dude who was a friend of a friend. My wife and I would smoke blunts and eat omelets stuffed full of green buds, get blasted and sit out on the beach, lying in the hot sands, watching the waves. The beach, on a hot and clear day or night, when you're high, is like taking footsteps to God.

We even rode out a hurricane together, high. Hurricane Katrina, when it hit Miami Beach. That storm was a doozy. It was insane how fast-moving it was, watching it on TV morph from a simple, benign tropical depression into a category one hurricane in only the span of a few hours.

There was a call to evacuate the beach, but seeing that it was only a cat one, and that we were in a tall, strong concrete building that'd withstood a multitude of storms, we settled on riding it out. Miraculously, we didn't lose power, though the cable went out, once the storm roared in.

I'll never forget the sound it made, that storm. It was stronger than the edge of the storm I'd experienced in Ft. Myers, with Nasdaq and the German girl.

There was a distinct sound to the storm, like a train, that rumbled in the air, and sheets of rain whapped and smacked at our windows, but fortunately for us, the storm surge didn't reach past the beach.

During the storm, we smoked weed and drank whiskey, stayed in bed. The only traumatic thing that happened was a neighbor of mine, a sexy young Latina, with a toddler daughter, had set her apartment's stove on fire. The idiot girl was randomly banging on doors, running like a chicken through the halls, screaming in a mixture of Spanish and English.

Hearing the commotion outside, I swung open my door, peered into the hall, and saw it was filled with grayish black smoke!

Not the best time to have the building catch fire, during a hurricane; curiously, though, I guess it could have been the perfect time for a fire in that the rains of the storm would have doused the flames. But wait, would the winds have accelerated it? And what about smoke inhalation? A shitty situation no matter what.

I ran out into the hallway, and asked the panicked, but still somehow impossibly gorgeous Latina, what was amiss...

She pointed to her apartment, down the hall, and I ran over to it, saw smoke pouring out its doorway, like a wide chimney that'd been flipped sideways.

Covering my mouth, holding my breath, I squinted my eyes and trudged in there to see her stove as the source of the smoke, a steady stream of thick, dark smoke

billowing from it. Worse was witnessing the lady's young daughter, maybe 3 years of age, standing there crying. I picked up the girl, brought her outside.

Then I called 911, from my cell phone, though I worried no one would show because the beach had been under an evacuation order. We weren't, technically, supposed to be there. Not to mention there was a category one hurricane raging outside.

Another neighbor, an older, chubby Cuban guy with a pencil thin mustache, wearing only a pair of tighty-whites, burst out of his apartment, ran down the hallway, brandishing a fire extinguisher, and went kamikaze, into her apartment, sprayed the stove, but ran out coughing and shaking his head, his receding hairline looking farther back as he coughed and heaved and ran back to his apartment without saying anything to anybody.

I ran back to my apartment, thinking the building would catch on fire or be filled with smoke, and my wife and I collected our valuables, started packing our backpacks, ready to rush into the thick of the storm and take our chances with Mother Nature as opposed to Father Fire and Sister Smoke.

Amazingly, though, shortly after I'd called 911, the Miami Beach Fire Dept arrived, did their thing, saved the day and night, month, and year. Are those guys ever true heroes! Rushing out during a hurricane to save us. Words can't express my gratitude for them. As they were leaving, myself, the Cuban, the Latina, my wife, applauded them.

After that, in the hallways, I must admit to treating the Latina with apprehension, not happy she'd nearly burned down the building, during a damn hurricane.

In the days following, I watched the hurricane churn up the warm waters of the Gulf of Mexico. It was boiling hot then, too, everywhere in Florida, around the Gulf, like 105 with the heat index, every day. Knowing how hot it was and how warm the water was, I was all too aware that wherever the storm would land, it would be terrible, given how quickly it moved and grew.

The storm was spawn of the devil. Fucking evil.

I remember walking by a newspaper vending machine nearby my apartment building in the days before Katrina lashed Louisiana and Mississippi. On the front

of the vending machine, the glass case where you can see the front page of the newspaper, someone had carved the word “LIES” into the glass, which always made me chuckle when I’d walked past it.

But that day, as the paper had a headline saying something about how New Orleans was in grave danger, I knew it was no lie.

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Aside from the storm, which, like a hot potato, had been passed, and had devastated somewhere else on the map. (Not to mention watching Katrina’s miserable aftermath.) Aside from that calamity, the rest of the summer, at least for us, was bliss.

We spent our days in a leisurely slow tropical rhythm, typically chilling on the beach, soaking up sun and swimming in the ocean that was then almost hot as a jacuzzi. Otherwise we’d be home, cooking pancakes, drinking/smoking, watching movies and gameshows, lying in bed.

(From a lucrative, late summer, short online gig, I’d clocked enough cash to take it easy our last couple weeks there...)

((My wife quit her job at the hotel, too, about a month prior to us leaving after she’d seen, through a gap in the hotel manager’s office door, the hotel manager, and a couple goons, rough up a guy, badly, beating him halfway to death and then dragging him out a backdoor, throwing him into the trunk of a car and driving off. My wife, being from Austria, had never seen much of any violence and was so freaked out that she quit the next day...))

The night before we had to leave, I was bummed, having to go, split South Beach. My wife was bummed out too. We didn’t say much that final night, spent most of it in reflective, mournful silence. It was difficult for us both to conclude that chapter of our lives. Despite the storms and occasional craziness, we’d been quite happy, loved the warm weather and South Beach lifestyle.

The morning we left, I had a surplus of weed, a fat bag, and decided to eat it all in an omelet.

As we headed to the airport, another hurricane was on the way, but fortunately we were scheduled to beat it, get out before it made landfall.

When we arrived at the airport, although I'd not felt much from the weed after eating it, when I stepped up to the Al-Italia front counter, to check in for the flight, the weed suddenly crept up and hit me like a ton of bricks. For a second, I completely forgot what I was doing. I was just standing there, awkwardly, not knowing what to say, with this gorgeous Italian stewardess tilting her head, raising an eyebrow, and looking at me funny. Though, after a few strange, wordless seconds, I remembered, that, oh yeah, I'm heading to Europe. It was a Hunter S. Thompson type of moment.

Looking back on it, I'm amazed they even let me on the plane.

My wife hadn't wanted any of the omelet. So she was stone cold sober, and while tolerant of my drugged-out state, she didn't bother to speak to me as we waited for the plane to leave.

And fuck, I was feeling the THC surge, more and more, that body buzz of edibles, and mildly hallucinating too. There were circumambient colors of everything in the airport, flashing and bursting, so bold and bright, so magnificent and beautiful. But it was also scary watching the hurricane on TV. I shuddered upon seeing video footage of it trashing a Caribbean island. I was feeling like it was a dastardly villain, the storm, the evil purple green blob on the radar; it was again an angel of gusty death, a waterborne killer creeping, thundering and charging our way, stalking us.

The Al-Italia plane called out their boarding all in Italian. But fortunately, knowing enough Spanish, I understood the boarding call and was somehow cognizant enough to rise to my feet, step us over to the queue. Once we boarded, it had to be the quickest take-off I'd ever experienced. In trying to beat that hurricane, like seconds after we sat down and buckled up, we were rolling down the runway, engines roaring, and mere minutes later, we were up in the clouds, soaring, heading off to the opposite side of the world.

I usually don't sleep well, or at all, on flights, but I was so blasted and relieved to be out of there, having escaped the windy weather beast, that I slipped away,

peacefully and deeply, soon after lift-off and sank into a superb slumber, the best I've ever had on a flight.

And when I woke up, I saw out my window to one of the most astonishing sights I'd ever laid eyes upon. The spirals and snowy white serrated tips of the French Alps...

It was incredible, arriving in Europe, seeing such a radically different landscape, the vertiginously steep Alps and verdant hills of the Austrian countryside. It was exactly how it looked in movies. In fact, even more pulchritudinous.

It struck me too, that while it was magnificently picturesque, everything seemed... somehow to be smaller. The people, the portion sizes of food, the houses, the cars, everything was smaller than in America.

Except the beer. When we arrived in Vienna, picked up by my father-in-law and brother-in-law, we stopped for schnitzel, which was scrumptious, and I gawked at how big the beer steins were. I'd asked my wife about it, and she'd shrugged, said how it was "just a beer" and that it was normal-sized.

It was amazing how much beer the Austrians drank. Seemed like everywhere people were drinking beers, walking down the street, drinking beers, on buses, drinking beers, at parks, drinking beers. There obviously were no lame public drinking laws like in the States. But what was odd, was that aside from stout people and some beer bellies here and there, there weren't the same amount of obese people as there were in the States.

My FIL included. A stout guy, with a belly, scruffy white beard and full head of scraggly salt and pepper hair, he was by no means obese and would down beers all day, from morning to night. My BIL too, drank beer day and night but wasn't fat.

(In Austria, beer was the golden fluid of life, commerce, and social events. It was also incredible, the beer. This was before the craft beer boom in America, so I'd never experienced just what beer could be. It was nothing like Budweiser, the beer in America. It was so rich, the Austrian beer. Its complicated flavors exploding on your tongue... And there were several small breweries in Austria that didn't export their products, you had to be there to get it. And, if you're a beer lover, like me, you were lucky to be there and to drink such immaculate brews...)

((Not only were they big drinkers of beer, the Austrians were also passionate about their schnapps. Religiously so. Believing it to have divine powers, that it was an elixir for any ailment. Have a cold? Drink a shot of schnapps. Headache, stomachache, sore throat? Drink a shot of schnapps. Back ache? Shot of schnapps. Insomnia? Schnapps. Bleeding wound? Douse it with schnapps. Break your leg? Pour schnapps on it; let it seep in, heal the fracture... Schnapps, the Austrian cure for anything!))

Back to my in-laws. They were pleasant, simple folks.

My mother-in-law was a lively, boisterous busybody, a workaholic, her body perpetually in motion. If she wasn't tending to the plants, she was cooking or cleaning or always doing something. I don't think I ever saw her sit for more than a couple minutes.

Having grown up in the aftermath of WW2, being dirt poor for many years as a youth, she'd had an intense work ethic instilled in her from a young age. Her family had been sustenance farmers. If they didn't produce crops, output they wouldn't eat. It was mostly because of her drive, smarts, and entrepreneurship that their family business had been successful, and although they'd done alright financially, her drive, passion for work burned as intensely as ever...

I had a hard time communicating with my in-laws, as they didn't speak English, and my German was minimal. But they were easygoing, and we got along well, especially my FIL and me, since we both enjoyed beer and watching whatever sport was on TV.

My BIL was a bit more of a problem. He was about the same age as me. Had a business doing electrical wiring or something. Sort of like my FIL, he was stout with a big belly and scraggly hair (though his unruly mop was sandy brown). But unlike my FIL, who was a laidback guy, my BIL was extremely aggressive, outgoing, arrogant, chauvinistic, and was constantly making snide and sexist comments about women, expecting me to laugh or join his banter. But I didn't. I didn't share those views or appreciate those remarks and would often just shake my head and walk away from him.

(It probably made matters worse that my BIL had lost his favorite drinking buddy... His buddy also being a horrible chauvinist, worse than him, I'd heard...

The guy had been a cop, an abusive one, as well as a wifebeater- and he'd also beat and sexually abused his teenage daughter...)

((The curse of karma licked him, though. The guy had become incapacitated following a horrific, drunken car wreck. The man, who was tall, strong and broad-shouldered, with a hatchet face and a sharp, pronounced jaw, had become a limping, shriveled vegetable, only able to enunciate loud grunts, shrieks, and retching sounds. Cared for, ironically, by a pretty young Slovenian maid, 24/7, he'd be walked around the neighborhood, retching and whimpering, the invalid being led like a dog...))

Back to my BIL, I could usually just ignore or walk away when he got too annoying, but there were times I couldn't escape him, like during family meals when he'd push others to drink with him and pour wine, beer or schnapps into other people's glasses and chide them, goad them, ridicule people if they didn't drink along with him, or if they wanted to stop, had had enough to drink.

I especially didn't appreciate that. For me, drinking is a fun activity, for relaxation. I have a special hate for drinking games. Those who make alcohol into a competition, force it on people. I don't like people who force anything on others, but especially something that can make you sick, or even kill you. His behavior was not only juvenile. It was dangerous.

At least he wasn't violent. Or we'd certainly have come to blows. When he'd try to push me to drink or talk any shit to me for not drinking as heavily as him, I'd tell him straight up "fuck you!" and walk off. And he wouldn't respond, would just move on to harassing his next victim. It was sort of sad, really, that way of drinking, that behavior, but we all have our flaws, and that was his.

Aside from his chauvinism and obnoxious drinking, he was a good man. Worked hard to support his family, worked long hours, hustling around to a number of sites, doing some backbreaking electrical wiring installations. I admired that about him, his work ethic and how he took care of his family.

He had a wife, my sister-in-law, and two kids, both young, 7 and 10, respectively.

His wife was a spitting image of my wife, only slightly older and with much shorter hair, hers dyed blond.

She was a stay-at-home mom, and they lived in a house next door to ours. I must admit I'd taken a liking to her, my SIL, as she, like my wife, was fetching. She'd make a habit of flaunting her looks by jumping into the outdoor jacuzzi in her yard, wearing a skimpy bikini, a couple times waving and smiling at me seductively as she sat in the steamy, bubbly waters.

She was consistently flirty with me, really, from our first meeting. Her persistent, silky little touches to my arm always seeming prolonged. And any joke I'd tell her caused her to laugh like I was a comedian. I was getting the vibes, undeniably.

(I could see her being sexually frustrated since her husband was more interested in drinking beer during his free time than anything else... And I was finding that adultery was a national sport in Austria, tales of it in gossip, the media, books, everywhere...)

Besides my SIL's looks and flirtatiousness, what was nice about her too was that she only spoke German with me. Whereas many other people in our neighborhood, as well as my wife, would only speak English with me, my SIL, although she could speak English, refused to speak English with me, out of an altruistic desire for me to learn the German language. It was cool of her. She was a lovely lady, inside and out.

My in-laws, as mentioned, were lovely folks too. It was mighty kind of them to allow us to stay with them. We returned their generosity by helping pay a share of the utilities, doing housework for them. My wife joined in the cleaning and cooking, looking after her sister's kids, and I was often outside chopping wood for the fireplace, mowing the lawn, walking the dogs, or lifting, fixing whatever had to be lifted or fixed...

They'd done well for themselves, my in-laws; had been in the plant growing and maintenance business their whole lives, and had built, literally, my FIL, MIL, workers doing the construction, a beautiful, large house outside of Graz, in the south of Austria. The dark brown, wooden house was constructed in the traditional Austrian style of architecture, with a triangle roof and spacious porches, balconies running from one side of the house to the other, and these massive panoramic windows featuring breathtaking views of the Alps.

(While the house was modern and stylish, it kept a certain countryside décor, since there'd usually be freshly shot and plucked pheasant, skinned deer hanging from the front porch- a stark contrast to the potted flowers and plants...)

((Every month, in the village, there were a few "Jägertag," a "Hunter's Day," where everyone was forbidden from leaving their homes, except hunters, the townsfolk bearing rifles, who'd go out shooting and slaughtering pheasant, deer...))

Back to the house. On the side of their house was an addition, with a kitchen, living room, fireplace, and bedroom, bathroom, and that's where my wife and I were to live for the time being upon first arriving in the country.

Being young, we didn't have much of a plan, other than I wanted to work online, and work for their business and grow marijuana, sell it legally.

She started looking for jobs but wasn't finding much, so she began working for her family's plant nursery, along with me.

It was tough work at the plant nursery. I began growing marijuana but was finding it difficult to sell enough plants to make much profit. Most people there could grow their own, and though I'd began experimenting with growing and breeding different strains, it was going to take time to get the business off the ground.

Plus, there were a ton of far more sophisticated growers in Holland to compete with. It wasn't going to be easy, but I was plodding along, studying marijuana science, botany. I designed a webpage for the plant nursery too, which I maintained, and I helped the business expand digitally, and continued doing my own side projects, gigs, work online. I'd also taken up a little day trading, attempting to grow my meager savings at a rate higher than the bank's paltry interest rates...

In addition, I worked on landscaping projects, something I'd never done prior to that. I did everything from digging holes, uprooting trees, planting plants. It was difficult, strenuous work. I'd never done manual labor and working outside in the bitter cold of the Austrian winter, at the foot of the Alps, it wasn't easy.

But I relished the challenge. Enjoyed the exercise and the fresh air. As well as the camaraderie, working with a diverse group of coworkers, at the company, many

of whom were migrant workers from Slovenia, Poland, and Serbia. The Slovenian guys I particularly liked. They were chill, friendly, always drinking beer- while working- and since they spoke German as a second language, it was easier for me to understand their imperfect accents and grammar, slower speed, pace of speech. I learned much of the German I did from talking with them. Even picked up a slight Slovenian accent, like them, with my German!

(I eventually picked up a great deal of German, for a time, speaking more German on a daily basis than I did English. Though my German grammar was always abysmal. I could never remember the “der, die, das,” which gender the nouns took, the datives, et cetera. My syntax was horrible, too, but I was communicating fluently.)

Another person I practiced my German with, and definitely my favorite coworker I had, was a neighbor of my wife’s, and her former classmate, a girl named Gertrud.

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Gertrud had striking features. Big, hypnotically blue eyes and an ovular, doll-like face, with a well-rounded chin. Her long wavy sandy brown hair cascaded over her shoulders, and she possessed a tight yet voluptuous, seductively curvy figure. She’d have been a hit with the boys if it wasn’t for her left leg being an inch longer than her right, giving her a slight though noticeable limp.

Despite her disability, I could see that Gertrud was mostly happy with her life. She had a big, kind and jovial family, who we’d have dinner with sometimes, and they were all wonderful, outgoing and warm people. She also had many friends and would go out drinking a lot, hoisting beer steins and singing in merriment.

However, I could see an emptiness in her, like she was longing for something, or somebody. That perhaps, in terms of romantic love, she was desperately lonely. My wife said that Gertrud had never, in her two plus decades of life, ever had a boyfriend, and probably had never even been kissed.

I found that difficult to believe. But, spotting the glint in her eyes, I could guess it true...

From the first time I saw her, I marveled at her spectacular figure. I love a woman with fleshy features, meat on her bones in the right places. I was enchanted by her doll-like face, too, her high cheekbones. Her long pointy thin nose and overall perfect facial structure.

Okay, yes, I'll admit that I quickly developed a crush on her.

I know, I know, I was an asshole for becoming smitten with her, since I was married. But I did get smitten. I got a thing for her at first sight. And I just couldn't get her out of my mind.

(In addition to me being an asshole, this was also due, in part, to how unhappy my marriage had become, which I will expound on later...)

At night, in bed, I began to fantasize of her. When I was with my wife, I'd think of...

Gertrud and I had started to work together in the mornings, as she'd do part-time work at the plant nursery, in addition to working on her father's farm. We'd usually pot plants together in a greenhouse.

There was an instant chemistry there. There was an electricity in the way she'd look at me when we worked together. I'd wonder if, in bed, she was thinking of me, too.

Like this one character on a trashy German soap opera I watched, who'd lie in bed, fantasize about a coworker she had a crush on. Those scenes, that comely young brunette, who sort of looked like Gertrud, always got my mind racing, and I soon got addicted to that show...

(At first I'd been watching it to learn German, because the show was so simple and easy to follow, but then, I got hooked on the show, due to its entertaining plots, and multiple jaw-dropping German beauties...)

((Living in the south of Austria, hardly any TV was in English, and this helped me to learn German, watching so much TV in the language. Funny though, was that in neighboring Slovenia, a small, war-torn, far poorer country, people, especially children, spoke better English, likely because many of their TV channels broadcast US/UK movies and shows in English, whereas in Austria the shows were dubbed into German. Except for German MTV, which showed a few US reality shows in

English. I'd found some of my neighbors' kids who watched those shows spoke English quite well. A paradox, the mind being both rotted and enhanced. An unlikely testament to the educational possibilities of trash TV!))

The trash German show I liked was about these people working in a Bavarian hotel, and like I said, there was that character, a brunette on the show who sort of looked like Gertrud, and I developed an increasingly dire crush on both the TV Gertrud as well as the real life Gertrud.

On the show there'd be these wild fantasy dream scenes where TV Gertrud would close her eyes and envision that proverbial "knight in shining armor" as her coworker and imagine him emerging from the mountains nearby and riding off with her on a white horse, galloping off into an orange hazy sunset.

I began to think of myself as that knight in shining armor, swooping her off her feet, and riding off with her, to another village in the Alps, where we'd live in peace. In her, I saw escape. I saw a girlish fun quality that my wife had been losing, day by day, since we'd arrived in Austria.

Okay, I guess I should expound on it, some, how my wife was this laidback girl who'd laugh and be easygoing, up for anything and carefree, when we were in South Beach, but once she got back to Austria, all these skeletons began to claw from her closet. It seemed like she had a morgue, maybe even a fucking cemetery in there. She'd totally become a different person, was constantly grumpy, arguing with me, bitchy and fighting with her mother as well.

It was like Gertrud was the girl I'd been in love with before. Everything about her reminded me of my wife- before we came to Austria. And that was what I wanted again. That person. That feeling...

But I knew it was complicated, of course, and I didn't want to cheat on my wife. I began also having my own issues, too, with being in Austria.

I'd been instantly distinguished in my wife's village. First of all, by being American in a small Alpine village that had no Americans, but also because I was a Jew, in an area that hadn't had Jews even in the vicinity for years.

There was once a small population nearby, hundreds of years ago, but they'd been massacred in a pogrom at the onset of the Crusades. A few more trickled in

after that but were banished for centuries by the monarchy and then the small number who'd returned around the 19th century were killed or driven out during WWII.

Almost no one in the village had seen a Jew in person. They'd only really heard and read about them in history books, mostly as just dying in the Holocaust.

Of course, I'd known this before arriving, but when I got there, in person, the weight of it hit me. I started to have these intense nightmares, stuff like being trapped in a prison, a burning building, or sitting in a plane about to crash. I'd never had such dreams, rarely ever had nightmares in my life, until I got to Austria. It was like there was a negative presence, an energy there. The ghosts of dead Jews trying to remind me of what happened. Or ghosts of Nazis trying to force me out.

Not that I received any maltreatment, though, aside from the night terrors and the terror that'd become my wife...

When I arrived to the village, most of the townspeople (other than a few elderly Hitler youth, who seemed to eye me with contempt) were both fascinated and mystified by me. The American. The Jew. Though aside from my plant nursery coworkers and in-laws, most of the townsfolk only stared at me curiously, didn't make much conversation, but were cordial.

The Austrians are generally a reserved people.

Gertrud, though, from the second we laid lovelorn eyes on one another, made no secret of wanting to talk to me. She wasn't shy at all around me. She wanted to know everything about me. We spoke mostly in German, since her English was minimal, and thanks to my SIL and Slovenian coworkers, my German had improved rapidly, and after only a short time, I was able to have conversations. Albeit at first in very poor, very broken and horrendously grammatically incorrect sentences, though I improved as time went on, and talking with Gertrud helped me greatly.

(My wife, though, had been terrible about helping me with my German. She refused to speak it with me and would get angry at my mistakes, lose patience quickly. But Gertrud didn't act like that and seemed to find my mistakes and lack

of comprehension endearing. Her easygoing nature part of what endeared me to her...)

((My wife, at this time, her behavior was increasingly erratic, and there were instances where she got violent, threw food or punched me, without provocation. One morning she simply erupted and went Mike Tyson on me, punching me, and bit my forearm, drawing blood and leaving a crescent-shaped scar that exists to this day...))

Gertrud acted nothing like this and was a breath of fresh air, blessed female companionship to have during my tumultuous, frayed relationship with my wife.

Not only was she kind, I found Gertrud to be rather curious about me, too. And she was also highly curious about the Jews. She wanted to know everything about Jews, like they were this mysterious people. She couldn't understand why everyone had hated them so much, either, and she told me of the burning sense of shame she felt when she learned Hitler was Austrian, that there were concentration camps in Austria, that it was possible something like that could actually happen.

(Which led me to remember when I was a child, asking my parents about the Holocaust, unable to understand not only how it could happen, but why...)

Her father, a farmer, needed help with his pigs, and had asked Gertrud if she'd ask me to help a couple days a week, but Gertrud explained that she'd read online that Jews couldn't touch or eat pigs, that it was against their religion, and asked if I could do something else on the farm.

However, when she told me of this, I let her know that I wasn't religious, ate pork, happily, and would be willing to help out her dad.

When I showed up to work with her dad, I was surprised to find her there, alone, waiting for me by the pigpen. We tended to the pigs, fed them, and then sat down for a quick lunch, eating this soup her mother had made for us that reminded me of matzo soup.

In talking with her, I found her to be blunt, very direct, and she asked me straightforwardly, if I had relatives killed in the Holocaust. I did, distant relatives in Russia, I told her.

She asked me if I hated the Germans or Austrians. Many in Austria had blamed the Germans, she said, for what happened, but she'd been reading about it online, and knew most in Austria gladly joined the Reich. Including many in her family, and although they were menial, low-level infantrymen, a few of whom died in combat, she felt such shame in that they'd fought for a scoundrel like Hitler. She almost looked like she was going to cry, telling me this.

I put my hand on her arm to comfort her. When I touched her, I had such a surge of electricity, barbs of energy jolt through me. The hairs on my arm stood up, and I had to take a deep breath... Collecting myself, I told her that I didn't hold it against the Germans or Austrians now, because I didn't think it was fair to blame them for their grandparents' and great-grandparents' crimes.

(I didn't confess to her my night terrors. But aside from those, aside from fear of sleep, ghosts in the air, and my wife's seemingly demonic possession, I was mostly enjoying my time in Austria.)

I said I liked Austria a lot, the food, the landscape, the people I'd met. I loved looking out my window, seeing the snowy peaks of the Alps. And that was true.

She said she was happy that I was happy in Austria. Again, though, she spoke bluntly, and blurted out that she didn't sense I was altogether happy with my wife, as I'd barely mentioned her.

I told her that we'd been having problems, yes, and that things were bad. We started staring into each other's eyes, and there was a pull, a centrifugal force, like her blue eyes were reeling me toward her, her eyes so alight with passion.

It was then my FIL walked to where we were sitting, walked by the wooden bench, near the pigpen, and shined this wide goofy grin at us. It was like he knew, he knew, from our body language, that there was more than friendly banter. And I knew, then and there, to be careful, because I was getting awfully close to something I'd regret. Forever.

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But nature has a way of taking its course.

Gertrud noticed me noticing her, likely in ways no other man had. I could sense she felt my eyes grazing her chest whenever she'd lower down to pick up something and that she knew I was watching her from behind, especially when she wore her tighter fitting pants.

I must have also talked to her and smiled at her in a way no other man had. I could see her blush, her face red as a tomato when I'd crack a joke and her pupils dilating when we'd lock eyes.

Finally, after a couple weeks of buildup, flirting, and eye tennis, on a sunny, crisp fall morning, while we were bringing in bags of seed to the shed, I lost control. I closed the shed door behind us, propped a bag against the door to seal it, and I sauntered up to her, lowered my face to hers and kissed her softly on the lips.

She stepped back in shock, staring at me in amazement and confusion. Her eyes bulging big as two blue moons.

This wasn't how she imagined her first kiss to be, I bet. Her first kiss happening with a married man, an American, a Jew, in a storage shed. But her shock suddenly dissipated and gave way to carnal instinct and she stepped forward and kissed me back, not really knowing how, but doing so anyway.

It was all a blur from the moment we locked lips. Her body went limp, was like putty in my hands. She didn't protest as I unsealed our lips and propped her up on a table, pulled down her pants and mine, and, impulsively, in a reckless fit of lust, breathing heavily, sucking wind through my teeth, I started having sex with her.

I didn't put a condom on and kept thinking I should put one on or that she'd stop me, because it was so wrong on so many levels what we were doing, but she didn't stop me and had her soft arms wrapped around me, hugging me like a teddy bear.

I guess it was that she didn't want to stop me. Maybe she wanted to get pregnant, have my baby, because then I'd have to leave my wife and be with her.

We hugged and kissed for a few minutes after we finished. I'd have pictured it could be weird after what we'd done; perhaps there'd be guilt. But there was none. Sure, we were adulterers. Sure, we'd sinned. But it just wasn't feeling that way.

After we lifted our pants, buckled our belts, we chatted and she told me that she'd been imagining our wedding. That she'd wanted me to leave my wife. That she wanted to be with me. She was moving fast, wasting no time. Though I told her we should take things one step at a time, and she reluctantly agreed, and I could sense a dash of disappointment in how her jaw quivered and how hesitantly she nodded her head as I told her this...

We kept up the same routine nearly every day at work, for the next couple weeks, together in the shed, every time without a condom, but I'd always pull out...

We were in love. We started planning when and how we'd come out about our affair, me getting a divorce and then marrying her.

Everything was falling into place. Until that day. That overcast late fall afternoon when the whole village heard a gunshot, then another. Two loud claps.

I was at my wife's family's plant nursery and walked briskly into the sound's direction. It'd come from Gertrud's house. Approaching the house, the wooden brown house with the triangle roof, the house that looked made of gingerbread, I saw a few of the farm's workers running in and out of the front door, frantically, some crying, all with twisted faces, expressions of horror.

One of the older Slovenian workers wiped tears from his leathery face and held me back from entering the front door. He tried to block me, but I could see into the living room, where, in a pool of blood, Gertrud's mother lay in a heap, in a pose of shock and death, frozen stiff to the floor.

Gertrud's grandfather, the jovial old man, the beer-sipping Santa Claus, sat on the couch, with a hunting rifle in his mouth and the back of his head missing.

The police arrived soon after, with their wailing sirens echoing off the trees, their sirens sounding like angry animals. It came out soon after, first through the gossip grapevine, then the local news, that Gertrud's mother had been having an affair with a farm worker, a strapping young Slovenian lad several years her junior, and Gertrud's grandfather, her mother's father, had discovered the affair and killed her and then himself.

It sent barbs of fear down my spine, knowing that Gertrud and I had been in a similar arrangement. It could have been Gertrud who was shot, or me, I thought,

narcissistically, and selfishly, at first, perhaps out of a primal instinct for self-preservation and protection of my Gertrud.

But those initial thoughts were deracinated by empathy for Gertrud, her father, her sister, her relatives, who were such kind people. It was truly a tragedy, and in an area that hadn't seen a murder in over a decade, it was overwhelming for everyone in the village.

And being a small village, everyone knew what happened. Afterwards, most of the townspeople stopped talking to Gertrud and her family, stopped going by her house for dinners. Not necessarily out of callousness. But more because they simply didn't know what to say. At the grocery store or passing by on the street, they'd nod awkwardly, and always with shifty eyes or patronizing looks of pity.

It was as if a fog, or black cloud of death hung over them. As if the death was a contagious virus no one wanted to catch. It reminded me of my father's cancer and how everyone abandoned my mom and me and how hurtful it was, the double whammy, first the grief of the loss, then the loss of normalcy and friendships.

Gertrud never talked about it extensively with her father or other relatives; being Austrian, they weren't very expressive people; they were not folks who'd talk much about their feelings. But her circle of friends was there for her, and so was I, though I saw less of her, due to her father scaling back the farm's operations.

Following what happened, her father decided not to raise and slaughter pigs anymore, which'd been the farm's main purpose. Instead he planned to turn the farm into more of a garden center, growing and selling plants, seeds, and crops, working in tandem with my wife's family.

Gertrud was grief-stricken, out of sorts, obviously, and I was seeing less of her, since we weren't working together as much, and, to this day, I'm haunted by what happened next, since I want to believe I could have stopped it. I want to believe that. I really do.

She'd been prescribed a set of medications to help her deal with anxiety and night terrors in the weeks following the murder/suicide. It was never clear if it was intentional, though it seemed so, and she overdosed on a mix of alcohol, valium and sleeping pills, and died in her sleep.

It was such a gut punch, losing her, and was even worse to discover she'd been pregnant, with my child. She'd not told me she'd missed her period, and I'd been pulling out, but it'd still happened. And now she, along with my second child, were gone.

And her father, how much grief could the man take? It was miraculous how stoic he remained through the whole thing. Gertrud had told me of how rough her family had it in the years following WW2, how they'd literally not had money, not simply been broke, but had no money at all, not a cent, and ate only what they farmed, ate pig fat, pig noses and ears and tongues and grass, weeds, and tree bark.

It occurred to me that having grown up so destitute must have steeled his resolve. I never saw him crack. He looked eternally shell-shocked, upset, but he was still up at the crack of dawn every morning, working, keeping on. Though he had that contagious fog of death, even more so after Gertrud died, and I was one of the few people who still visited and talked with him.

Unlike before, however, when he'd greet me at his door with beer or schnapps, smiling and joking and talking of old John Wayne movies, old Western films that he loved and asking me a million questions about America (I was a de-facto US ambassador to the village). Instead of being jovial, he was dour, quiet. When I'd go by there, he'd drink beer silently, and would blankly stare at the TV, usually sports, usually skiing, which he'd vacantly watch like a zombie.

I felt like a zombie too. It didn't seem real, that Gertrud was dead. It was like she was gone, on a trip, and that she'd be back soon. That we'd be together again.

I'd sip mint tea, in front of the fireplace, in the evening, and occasionally I'd glance out at the orange sunset that cast a halo-like glow over the jagged, snow-capped mountains in the distance. I'd think of Gertrud and me, stealing off, in the small hours of morning, running away together. I thought of her coming back. That it was all a mistake, her death. That she'd be released from the hospital and be back smiling and feeding the pigs and planting flowers, asking me endless questions and cracking jokes.

But she wouldn't. She wouldn't be back. Now, she and my unborn baby were being eaten by the flowers. They were with the flowers. They were the flowers.

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The trauma didn't end there. More peripety was to follow.

In addition to my grief, I was feeling like a piece of shit, for cheating on my wife. I can't imagine she'd cheated on me. She never seemed like the type, but, in all honesty, I didn't really know her. That's right. I'd didn't really know the person I'd married.

We'd rushed in. We'd eloped. In Miami, she was this laidback, fun person, with a wonderful sense of humor, and the cutest smile and prettiest brown eyes I'd ever seen. She was tall and model slim. Looked like a model.

There were beautiful women everywhere in Austria and Europe. In fact, modeling agencies would come out there and just set up a booth on the street, recruiting prospective models, literally just pointing at passersby or having pretty young things walk up to them. My wife herself had done some modeling. With her slim features, high cheekbones and thin long narrow nose, she was exactly what you'd expect to see in a makeup ad.

But like many models, she had struggled with an eating disorder. In her case it was anorexia. I had no idea about it, thought she was naturally thin, and she'd never had any problems eating back in South Beach.

However, in Austria, as I mentioned before, her closet jampacked with skeletons kicked open its doors, and the skeletons, her ghosts took possession of her, and tore her away from me.

It might sound like hyperbole. But it's true. She was as if overtaken, possessed by malevolent forces, became a different being, a new person.

She started to refuse to eat. Shed numerous pounds off her already thin frame, started to look frail, bony. Her face sunk in. She'd wear these striped pajamas at night and would, seriously, look like something in a concentration camp. Given Austria's history, and my being Jewish, it disturbed me in several ways, seeing her in those pajamas.

Not only were her looks starting to go, but she began to smell. This awful, sour smell, like milk that'd turned. This sour stench emitted from her, especially in the bed. It was because she'd been starving herself, and so her body was eating itself, in an attempt at nourishment, causing this wretched stink.

She'd fly off the handle, too, accuse me of trying to kill her if I didn't want to eat something, storming off. She'd been working in a hotel, part-time, and had gotten fired because guests were complaining about how she looked, that she was so skinny. It was scaring people.

At first, I couldn't understand what was with her, why she was being like this. I didn't know anything about anorexia. Though I did know of bulimia, as a teacher I'd had in high school, as well as a girl I'd gone to high school with had had bulimia and that was why their teeth were slightly rotted and crooked. But anorexia, I'd only heard topical things about, and I knew of its existence, but it was hard for me to know it was happening to her.

I think also, too, I was in denial. I didn't want to believe there was a problem. Or subconsciously I wanted the demons to leave her body so much that I thought they would. I somehow thought that it was a temporary condition, like a cold, and that it would resolve itself. I remember, later, looking at pictures of her from this period and thinking of how frail and skeletal she appeared.

But I never saw her like that, with my eyes. I've heard it said that the camera adds pounds, and in this case, it was my mind's camera, my skewed perception, my own eyes that were adding pounds. My eyes were lying to me.

Finally, I confronted her, and grimly, like a witness in the courtroom, she spilled her skeletons. Confessed she'd had this problem for years. That in South Beach, she was in remission, but when we got to Austria it boomeranged back.

Worse though, was that she confessed she was in a secret eating contest with everyone else. That she challenged herself to eat less than everyone. Including me. Since we'd gotten to Austria, she'd taken over the majority of the cooking, as this is usually the custom there, that the woman does the cooking (my FIL and BIL had thought it strange that I'd cooked some of our dinners).

I'd noticed her making larger and larger portions. Very fattening food, too. Lots of cheeses and sausages. Cakes. Not that I can complain too much. Her cooking was

excellent, if not extravagant, but I was seeing her serving me increasingly gluttonous sizes of food, taking less and less for herself, and her becoming enraged if I didn't clean my plate.

Needless to say, I ballooned in weight, going from 160 to 200 in only a few months. My six-pack replaced with a Buddha belly and bitch tits...

Not that I can totally blame her, because I certainly had a part in it, but once she confessed that she was in an eating contest with me, I knew what was going on. Like in the Hansel and Gretel story, I was being fattened up.

Not to be eaten, though, by a witch, although with how erratic she was becoming, her eventually cannibalizing me seemed like a possibility, but it was that she was mentally cannibalizing me, was deliberately trying to make me fat, make me eat heaps of food, so she could feel better about herself. And she wasn't doing this only to me. She was constantly cooking, preparing these massive plates of sausages, cheese dishes, and heavy cream-laden desserts, huge and piling high cakes, and bringing them around to everyone in the neighborhood, feeding everyone, while she starved, wasted away, shrunk to bone.

It was horrific. Seeing that happen to her.

But it got worse when I caught her cutting herself.

I'd come back from working with Gertrud's dad and stumbled upon her in our bed, with a steak knife, slowly tracing it on her upper thigh.

Blood trickling, I ran towards her, pried away and seized the knife. She offered no resistance.

I'll never forget the look on her face. It was so blank. So empty. So numb. Her eyes, once so warm, were cold, haggard, empty.

She was listening to "Scar Tissue" by RHCP, a record she listened to over and over, and a record that to this day haunts me of her.

I'd noticed before that there were a few scars on her upper thighs. They looked like tracts left on fresh ice by skates. But I never asked about it. I'd thought that since she'd done gardening work, maybe they'd come from accidents involving gardening. It seemed plausible. I'd always thought of people who cut themselves

to be raving lunatics or something. She'd seemed to be far too well-adjusted and sane to do such a malicious act of self-harm.

Again, I didn't know the person I married. I was young. I had rushed in. And I guess these aren't standard questions a person would ask a prospective spouse, if they were anorexic, if they cut themselves, et cetera.

More skeletons had danced from the closet. Introduced themselves. They never had left, I surmise, and had been orbiting her, away for a time, and had now returned and crashed into my life, like mental satellites, mental space debris falling from the sky.

Seeing her bleed like that, seeing her use her body as a voodoo doll, was an image I wish I could forget, repress into amnesia. But I can't.

Staring at the wall like it was on fire, unable to lift her vacant eyes from it, she told me she cut because it felt good. It felt so good, she said, almost like an orgasm. She said it reminded her she was alive when she'd feel dead inside, which she often did.

The first time she'd cut herself, she went on, was after she was sexually assaulted as a child, by a door-to-door salesman, who attacked her when she was home alone. Afterwards, once he'd left, after he'd pressed a blade to her throat, threatened to kill her if she told anyone, she herself grabbed a blade, from the kitchen, and said she planned to slit her wrists, but was too much of a coward (her words) and instead cut her leg and had since continued the practice. But then, when I'd just caught her, was the first time she'd done it in ages.

So, obviously, this was hard to take, a tough pill to swallow. Not that it excuses cheating on her. Not that I'm the victim. Everyone has their demons.

I'd spoken to a couple old friends, relatives, and they'd told me to leave her. That she was too much of a train wreck to be with, that she couldn't be in a relationship with anyone until she sorted out her deep depression, self-harm and eating disorder issues.

However, even though I was an asshole who'd slipped and had cheated and impregnated his neighbor, and even though I was beginning to have worsening desires- running, burning, carnal thoughts of my SIL- seeing her prance around in

her bikini, and how she was flirting with me more and more, her smiling, giggling and playing with her hair, her touching my arm and shoulder a little too much, dammit, still, I'd signed up for better or worse. This was worse. I'd already betrayed her, but I wasn't going to leave her.

(All the while, though, as she was becoming more erratic, emaciated, I was having more vivid night terrors, visions of seeing my wife, naked, her bony skeleton body. My wife slashing herself bloody, slashing her wrists and drowning herself in a bathtub full of dark red blood.)

((There were nightmares I'd had of Gertrud too, holding and rocking our giggling baby, us happy before her grandfather, missing half of his face, burst into the room, with his hunting rifle, and shot us dead. Another nightmare I'd had was a recurring vision of a red-haired little girl in a concentration camp, smiling and waving at me, alongside her mother and grandparents, as they stood in line for the gas chamber's showers... Every night was another awful dream. I can't say what was worse at this point, my dreams or my reality... For the first time ever, I began to seriously hate sleep, and was thinking there were angry spirits of murdered Jews living in the forests nearby, sucking and drinking my sleep like vindictive vampires...))

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I spoke with my wife's parents about her issues. My FIL didn't know how to respond and sat there, drinking beer, staring off into space. But my MIL agreed, enthusiastically, with my assertion that we get my wife hospitalized, and even went as far as to tell me that my wife was "horrible" and a "terrible person." I wasn't sure if that translated into English how I interpreted it.

Later that day, we had an intervention, and told her we decided to commit her to a mental hospital where she could undergo treatment. Surprisingly, at the time, she didn't put up a fight and agreed to go.

A few days later, we drove up there to have a look at the facility, my FIL, her and me. It was near Vienna, the hospital, and looked more like a ski resort than a hospital. The place was next to a sprawling, scenic freshwater lake that was

draped by a range of spectacular emerald green mountains, their serrated tips like the mouth of a playful animal.

As an American, it was unbelievable to me that this was wholly covered by national insurance. Wouldn't cost us a dime...

We drove back to Graz, silently, listening to Bruce Springsteen, which my wife, FIL and I all liked.

She'd agreed to be committed, check into that hospital, and was to leave in a couple days. I was to stay at the house, keep working online, at the plant nursery, and keep helping Gertrud's dad.

However, that evening, as we, my wife and I, sat down to dinner, my wife had something of a psychotic break. She picked up a carving knife, came at me with it, yelling and cursing, saying how I wanted to "get rid of her."

Being as frail and weak as she was, I was able to slap the knife out of her hands, easily. Part of me wanted to pummel her. Like, how could she do that? Attack me like this? After I'd stuck with her, despite all her problems and had orchestrated the intervention, the movement to have her treated... But I knew the truth. And I couldn't be mad. I knew that it was her demons in control. That this wasn't her anymore...

After I'd slapped her arm, the knife flew to the floor, and she collapsed, began bawling, weeping, saying how she wanted to die.

It was clear to me that she was on a path to destruction. Far worse than I imagined. She had a death wish.

I ran downstairs, got her parents, and we drove her back to the hospital, that night, and had her committed.

I'll never forget the look on her face as we left the hospital, her crying in her mother's arms, the look of pain, sadness. It hurt so bad, to walk away, to know there was nothing I could do for her. That image of her in anguish is forever burned into my psyche. It's another image I wish I could delete like a computer file. But I can't.

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While in the hospital, she turned for the worse, was calling me daily, berating me for putting her there. Saying the worst possible things she could say. Hurtful, personal things. Things I never thought her capable of uttering. She blamed me for ruining her life. That everything was my fault.

In a way, seeing her disintegrate the way she did, it was similar to watching my father die. She'd become emaciated like him. She'd been overtaken by this terrible disease. And like him, she was in denial about it.

I'd done what I could to help her but was exasperated. I'd talked to her parents, neighbors, and a couple schoolmates of hers. All told me really awful things, stories of her temper, her lashing out at people, her conflicts. She'd driven away most everyone and didn't have any friends. It turns out that was part of why she went to South Beach, to start anew.

It was like the person I'd met and fallen in love was dead. I blamed myself. I figured that we should have stayed in South Beach. Then none of this would have happened. I started blaming myself for Gertrud's death too. Like I should have done more to help her, taken her away from this crazy village, and maybe she'd still be alive, have had my baby.

The nightmares were continuing too. Every night seeing death, tormented by my sleep, and every day felt like 100 years...

I was starting to think that not only was my wife not right for me, maybe Austria, too, wasn't for me. At first the history had disturbed me, the nightmares, but it was becoming more about teleology, with all these crazy people and death. I came to believe in a negative mist, an energy, a form, a heart of darkness there.

Insane cases in the media came out too, like Josef Fritzl, the arrant psychopath, who'd kept his daughter as a captive sex slave for years, in a locked basement of their house, and had kids with her, the kids also forced to live as prisoners in the basement.

There were a couple other similar cases too of girls being kidnapped, forced to live as slaves, prisoners in some freak's house.

I was feeling like a prisoner too. This wasn't the life I wanted. This wasn't the person I wanted to marry. I missed America, too, my old friends there, the culture.

I'd reached a denouement.

I decided it was best to separate from my wife. Take a few months apart, let her have her treatment, hopefully get better. I needed a break. And I wanted to travel around Europe a little, see Rome, Scotland, and Paris, while I could. I was so close to so much.

And so I left. I left Austria. Left that crazy village, with all its memories. And my first night away from there, the nightmares stopped. Completely.

By myself, I did some backpacking, traveling around the continent and saw incredible, once in a lifetime sights. The Eiffel Tower, the Roman Coliseum, The Highlands of Scotland.

I visited England, saw my long-lost aunt, met extended family out there and had a blast. The English countryside being one of the most beautiful places I'd ever been. The rolling green hills' beauty defying mere words to describe it.

I'd been looking at jobs in America and had found an opportunity in Sarasota, at a legitimate finance company, seeking loan officers, especially those with international experience, language skills, and although I spoke an accented, stilted, and grammatically poor German, I'd become quite fluently conversant, and had aced the phone interview, part of which was done in German.

Back to America I went. To start my new life. A life that was surprisingly boring. Reverse culture shock hitting me like a sledgehammer, in ways I didn't think possible. Everything seeming otiose.

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Shortly after I returned to Florida, my wife and I came to the realization, through a series of long emails and tearful Skype calls, that we'd rushed in, eloped like young fools, and that through time and distance, we'd grown too far apart. There was no way we could reconcile, go back to how it was back in South Beach. She

didn't want to live in America, anymore, and I didn't want to live in Austria. It was brutal, splitting up, deciding to divorce, but it was for the best. And it was amicable, at least at first...

I'd gifted her the cash I'd saved working in Austria, nearly \$8,000, a TON of money for me at the time, to help her start off when she was discharged from the hospital, especially since her parents had decided to kick her out of their house and force her to pay for her own apartment.

However, once she left the hospital, she immediately had breast augmentation surgery, spending almost all the money I'd transferred her. Then she demanded I return to Austria, file and pay for divorce proceedings there, which would have cost several thousand dollars.

That wasn't going to happen. I couldn't get the time off work, and I'd already filed for divorce in America. The pressing problem for her was she'd been attempting to claim state benefits, welfare, in Austria, because she was having trouble finding work, and since her parents also didn't want her to work at their company any longer.

She could have used the money I gave her to start up, see her through a couple months of job searching, job retraining, or pay for the divorce proceedings there. But no, she'd decided to buy a big pair of fake tits. Fake tits that looked strange on her slender frame, anyway, made her look like a chicken.

I didn't have much sympathy for her, because she'd wasted the cash, in my opinion. And things turned ugly. She sent me a series of castigating, threatening emails, naked pictures of her fake tits, and told me sordid tales of her sexual exploits. That she'd been getting gangbanged. Had also been gangraped and had been sleeping with countless men. I'm not sure how much of that was true, but it wasn't pleasant to hear. Those weren't pleasant emails to read.

Thinking back to high school, to Jessica, what an asshole I'd been to her, I didn't want to be that guy again. And I held my tongue. I was a gentleman. I didn't resort to shit-slinging. I simply ignored her emails. I also ignored the letters I got, in German, from an Austrian court, saying she was suing me, for various superfluous causes, the letters demanding me to show up to court hearings halfway across the world.

(During the process of the divorce, I drank heavily and again returned to listening to heavy metal, 80s metal, in particular. Those songs, soothing me, alleviating my pain. Music is such sonic power, such a time machine. Those old metal songs from Motley Crue, Guns N' Roses, Poison, took me away to happier places, simpler times...)

After a few months of her terrorizing my email box, her constant belligerent voice messages and pestering phone calls, Skype calls, finally, the divorce went through. Once I'd received the paperwork from the court, I mailed copies to her, and then called her.

A strange voice answered when I called. It was some Austrian dude. He didn't speak English. I asked, in German, if she was there, and he asked who I was. I told him my name. He told her. Then she rushed to the phone.

She immediately wanted to fight and said she'd been receiving harassing phone calls from an unknown caller and accused the caller of being me. I told her it wasn't me. I then told her the divorce went through. Once I said this, her tone changed from one of anger to one of sorrow. I wished her well. That was the last time we talked on the phone.

We didn't speak for two years after that. Fortunately, last I talked to her, via text chat she initiated on Skype, I discovered she had gotten better. She'd become a vegan and health nut, finding herself on that course through the help of a shrink she'd had in the hospital I sent her to. I was happy that I'd helped her recovery, in a way, by pushing her to seek treatment, and I was happy she'd found a better path. It's my sincerest hope she can remain in remission, forever, from her demons.

We ultimately became estranged, my ex-wife and I, due to distance, and I believe also because of the psychic pain it caused us both, just talking, how it was a reminder, a living ghost of our relationship. Tragedy can have that effect. Just talking to or seeing a person's face, hearing their voice reanimates the trauma, resurrects it... However, at least with our last talk, we signed off on good terms.

(It is strange how a breakup is like a death. When the relationship is done, that person, in a way, dies. A part of me definitely died after my divorce... However, what's stranger about breakups is that the person can be dead to you, but still

alive and in the world, and with other people. Further proof that in our macro life, we live micro lives, follow different paths. And journeys, paths, for better or worse, diverge...)

My ex-wife, last I knew of her, was again in remission. However, for me, though I'd stayed strong through so much craziness, once back in America, I was about to have my own reckoning, flirtation with depression and madness...

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I'd had many ideas in my mind about returning to America, how happy it'd make me to be back. It was similar to how I'd felt in leaving Tennessee, going to South Beach. I'd had these ideas of grandeur, plans of what I'd do, what things would be like... How perfect it would be...

But it wasn't so. After the initial elation wore off, peripety and reverse culture shock hit me hard.

It was my culture, my country, but I felt deracinated, like I didn't belong. In Europe, the UK, it seemed like everyone was worldly, or had traveled somewhere. One guy I met in England said how he'd not traveled much, "only been to 10 countries," and he'd mentioned this in all seriousness, no sarcasm whatsoever.

But when I returned to America, talking with people, no one I talked to had been anywhere outside the States, aside from Military people. And when I spoke of being in Europe, everyone asked if I was in the Army...

My casual tales of living in the Alps were met with curious stares and awkward silence. People didn't care much about other countries, either, whereas I'd be bombarded with questions from Europeans about America, the sentiment stateside, mostly wasn't mutual. Most didn't care at all about Europe or any other country.

Or about politics.

Most Europeans liked talking politics, having lively discussions about it, gardeners included. But in America most people didn't even wish to talk about American

politics and cared far less, like not at all, about the EU or Labor in the UK. It was disheartening to witness such an apathetic and uninformed populace.

I blame much of this on the media.

TV in America was far, far worse than what I'd watched in Europe. It was something I'd not noticed about America until I left for a while and returned.

I'd watched tons of TV growing up, had always enjoyed it. The TV was my constant companion, enlightening me, cheering me up, entertaining me, always there when I needed it. And I'd watched plenty of the box in Europe, too, had learned German, largely from watching German TV, especially the soap operas, which I found ironic, given how stupid they are, how they allegedly "dumb down" people, and here I was using them to educate me and improve my linguistic skills...

Watching American TV again, though, really did feel like it was dumbing me down. I was amazed, too, how many commercials there were, how awful most of the programming was, so many crappy reality shows, how brain-dead it was... Aside from HBO, cable, some shows on the net, it was mostly such bullshit. The news, especially. The news out in Europe, on the BBC, was actually news, no flashy graphics, fluff.

American cable news channels, CNN, Fox News, were complete fluff, screaming matches and partisan politics. They never covered international news, either, unless it was about war or a weather disaster. It was terrible. It made me think that this is why Americans, so many of us, are so ignorant, hate politics. Look at so much of this media. It was pathetic.

(Is it that the media is a reflection of the populace, or vice versa? I don't know.)

I was feeling disillusioned, more so every day. I was lonely too. I'd been gone so long that I'd lost touch with most of my friends.

(I'd also lost touch with the few family members I'd spoken with, my family never having been too close, and long having been fragmented by deaths and distance, disputes and rival factions. None of which I ever meshed with. To this day I only maintain a distant relationship with my mother as well as sporadic contact with

an assortment of uncles and aunts. My ability to form, maintain bonds forever frayed by my childhood traumas, PTSD, and CTE...)

Most of my friends I'd had growing up, I'd come to realize were just people I smoked weed with.

One of whom, Taylor, was a dude I'd known my whole life. But shortly before I'd left for college, we'd had a falling out after he'd failed to testify on my behalf in traffic court, after a lady ran a red light, hit my car, while I was giving Taylor a lift somewhere, and then the stupid lady, a puffy haired late middle-aged African lady who didn't speak much English, sued me (!) for \$50,000.

The frivolous case, thankfully, was thrown out. However, I lost respect for Taylor after he'd not shown up to court. I'd explained the situation to him, how important it was that he get my back, testify I wasn't at fault, and he'd agreed to, a week or two before the court date. But when I'd arrived at the courthouse, he wasn't there. When I called him, he asked me on the phone, if he "had" to go, sounding annoyed I'd asked and that I was waking him up "early" at 9 a.m. That was the end of that friendship.

The guy I'd known my whole life and thought was my bro had turned out to be nothing but a selfish stoner. It was a massive letdown, but, unfortunately, that's a major downside of weed. Many of the friends you make smoking it are losers.

Although not all were like that. Some had done well for themselves, had moved to other cities, got jobs, got married, had kids. They'd gone on with their lives. Become established. I was trying to start anew and was finding it much harder as an older person.

When I was younger, in school, it was easy to meet people, get into things, but as I'd aged, was an older, divorced guy, it was tough. People I met weren't young anymore. Everyone had their own thing going on. And digital life had taken hold too. At work, at the office, on breaks, everyone was just staring at the phones in their hands. No one would really chat, face to face, with each other.

(Which leads me to think mankind is totally fucked with AI, machines. If we can't even handle smartphones, what will highly intelligent, self-replicating AI do to us? Elon Musk, Sam Harris, others who've sounded the alarm, I concur, are right to worry. Like in that Terminator movie, those cyborgs may yet come annihilate us.

Big Tech's tiny square phone soldiers are certainly doing a fine job enslaving us, making us zombies...)

Aside from loneliness, my job was decent, and I was grateful to have it. It was fairly easier work than I'd done before, as people were coming to us for money, and my function was to evaluate their backgrounds, determine if they were suitable for loans. If so, I'd pass them along to the underwriting department for final say, and if approved by the underwriters, the loan was made.

There was paperwork involved, and I'd speak with around 50 to 100 people a day, mostly by phone, some via email, fax, text chat.

It was tiring, mentally, psychically exhausting to talk with so many people. And my throat would be sore at the end of the day from yapping so much, my eyes red and burning from staring at computer screens. But it was certainly much easier than digging holes in the frozen ground, ripping out trees, and it was considerably better than telemarketing, being yelled at, hung up on all day. The clients I talked with were typically pretty pleasant, polite, as are most people when they're asking for large sums of money...

I was doing okay, financially, had benefited by living with my in-laws, not paying rent while living in Europe, and had benefitted from investing some funds I'd accumulated working online, buying a lucrative set of stocks for dirt cheap during the Great Recession and profiting from the subsequent stock market rebound.

At my new job, I wasn't only being paid bullshit commissions or draw, I was paid a generous base salary, plus healthy commissions. I had bought a cute little sportscar and was renting a small apartment near a beautiful white sand beach.

Sarasota was gorgeous, and I enjoyed the beaches there, greatly. I'd go swimming, running barefoot in the sands, breathing in the clean, salty sea breezes, basking in the aureate Florida sunshine.

I was also taking long vigorous walks around the city in the mornings and evenings, before and after work, when it wasn't too hot, and there was this glorious greenway near my house, with lush, verdant tropical foliage and a colubrine canal running through it where you could spot lizards, owls, otters, and even occasional alligators crawling in and around the mangrove... Taking brisk

walks, basking in the balmy air, jolted me with beautiful, hot, sweaty bursts of life...

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My life, incredibly, had turned out okay. But deep down, I was becoming increasingly depressed. Becoming subsumed in an inexplicable malaise. I was soon hallucinating, delusional, unable to sleep more than an hour or two each night. As I plunged into psychosis, the floaters I'd seen on and off, since I was a child, were returning with avengement.

The less I slept, the more floaters I saw. And in the floaters, I saw red and various colors that were malignantly effulgent and blinking. I saw bugs in the corners and occasionally the bugs were real; there were huge cockroaches in my apartment that could fly and would emit screeching sounds. Once or twice they crawled on me in bed, and I feared them. I believed they were evil. Full of rage, hate. The cockroaches were agents of evil, sent by, what I believed to be, darkness, and its dark forces.

(I feared the cockroaches would eat me when I died. Like any bug I saw, I wondered, how many corpses it ate... That's part of why we hate bugs, I think I read or heard somewhere, and I worried these bugs, these insidious flying cockroaches might eat me alive...)

Hate, fear burned inside me as my insomnia grew worse. And I began to have horrific visions, washing into my mind, touching in like tides. They were as bright and vivid as the nightmares I'd had in Austria, but they visited me diurnally.

I was having revelations and visions of a cabal, of murky characters that lived in my TV. They lived in my computer. They controlled YouTube, Facebook. They rested in the electronic eyes. I began to see a Darkness as the controller of it; a lizard, a vampire, a monster being to blame for everything that went wrong.

I could see a cabal. They were God. They were in control. They'd mapped out my life and tormented me. I read a story by Richard Matheson that'd touched on it, about a man who'd stabbed several on a bus because he'd discovered an evil

cabal to be attacking his life. And I was having similar thoughts, was hearing similar sounds and voices.

I wasn't ready to stab anyone, but I was ready to fight back. I was thinking of again filling a water gun with piss, shooting piss into people's faces, or just going out, and randomly kicking people, just anyone I saw, kicking them, and doing so would warn the cabal that I was no easy target and perhaps they'd relent.

The cabal was sending me ghosts, too. Ghosts that spoke to me and in me. Past versions of myself. Past versions of me trapped in cold jail cells, chained to a toilet, or myself naked, walking with a shotgun, around my childhood home, searching empty rooms, searching for what, I didn't know.

There were vicious barking dogs in my dreams, on invisible leashes, led by self-immolating Buckingham Palace Guards who were chasing me down winding halls full of fun mirrors, and mysterious, shadowy people in feathered masks and hula skirts, jumping out from under my bed, poking at me with scissors.

Unlike the dreams, the night terrors in Austria, these vivid diurnal visions didn't terrorize me, though. It was more as though I was watching them like a horror film.

I knew they were of the cabal. The cabal, not my eyes, was the menace. They were the black cloud, the whispers in my ears, the scent of death, that burning plastic smell I sensed at night.

I started searching for info on conspiracy and shadow organizations. I found theories of lizard people that lived in satellites. I was becoming convinced the stars in the night sky were satellites, controlled by dark actors. And that the sun was their headquarters.

The floaters were imprints of the stars, maps, and warnings of their malevolence. They were in full control of the cockroaches, too, which had grown more brazen in their attacks on my apartment. I suspected the Vikings might have followed me to my apartment in Sarasota, but I never saw the Vikings. My only neighbors were elderly couples waiting to die, and a beer bellied truckdriver named Steve whose face and awkward gait made him look sort of like a baboon.

(I found a device, online, that emitted a soundwave to deter insects, bought it, found it worked, and I wasn't seeing any cockroaches afterwards. I considered it my first victory against the cabal, and it likely prevented me from walking into the grocery store and slapping random people upside the head, which is what I'd been fixated on doing...)

((For a little while, too, I'd wanted to walk into a grocery store, slap random people upside the head, simply to see their reactions... I'd been inspired to do so after reading of a Buddhist monk who'd done something similar a thousand years ago, just running around his village, slapping people in the head, with a stick, just to see what they'd do...))

The dark actors, were up there, though, in the stars; they were responsible for my grief. I blamed them.

And I was solving them. I could see them, watching me. I finally knew their game, that my TV was a camera. And so I stopped watching it and began to cover it with a heavy bath towel.

More and more, things were being explained to me, through visions, mornings and nights. At work, though, the visions hid themselves, because the dark actors, I suspected, owned the company, monitored my communications, and could probably hack my brain there, so at work, the voices, videos I saw in my head were silent, snow on the screen, white noise, but when I'd leave, they'd flick back on.

And on and on. Things were explaining themselves; secrets telling me their gospels. Why so much had gone wrong. Why everyone I knew died and why everything I touched turned to shit.

The satellites, the dark actors, I had to stop them...

I began to plan it. Plan a retaliation, a spree, without guns, though, only kicks and punches and water guns filled with piss. The visions, plans were developing, and I was seeing them like a burning bush.

I'd be a Rambo, a one-man army, waging war, slapping and kicking everyone, kicking every man I saw in his balls, punching every woman in her tits. I'd wear an

alligator costume, and hijack a military helicopter, and shoot everyone with piss, and with my dick I'd be running the streets with my dick out, pissing at people.

The power of a naked man, running the streets, the panic and terror it would cause is undeniable!

I'd make it into Area 52, a secret lab in an underwater bunker, deep in Lake Okeechobee, where the satellites had a communications link. From there, I be beamed up to the satellite, where I could then destroy the stars, spank and slap the nefarious operators, free humanity from the Lizards.

I was having these visions, writing about it in notebooks. I was seeing humanity as shit slaves, piss slaves. But this was not through a fault of their own. It was a becoming of the satellites, and how the operators, the dark actors, used money, TV, media, and schools to brainwash, control the populace. If only I could see to the dark actors' and stars' destruction, the world could be free!

It was during this fog that I came to believe that I wasn't alone in my fight. There was an army. The moon was their base. This army of like-minded soldiers, had been attacking the satellites, trying to destroy them for some time. If only I could find them, join the resistance. But even if I didn't find them, I'd fight alone...

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Of course, the media painted the army as whackos and losers, but they were anything but. They were fighting against the satellites. Every target of theirs had been carefully selected by prior freedom fighters, their ghosts, their souls living on the moon, communicating through machines, online cables, televisions and newspapers, social media in manifestations of cosmic karmic energy.

(The entire moon landing hoax was perpetrated to show an empty moon. The dark actors' attempt to conceal the freedom fighters' base.)

These were the ghosts in their moon headquarters. They were a resistance, and these ghosts had adapted and communicated via telepathic waves and digital Ouija boards. I could sense they were speaking to me.

The freedom fighters had been moving our army closer to its ultimate goal, disarming and destroying the satellites. The stars. The Sun Hive- the brain in the sky.

They were martyrs, heroes.

I began spending hours studying these fighters, watching footage of their work, reading of their backgrounds, reading and writing spreadsheets listing freedom fighters from everywhere in the world.

They'd taken up arms. They'd done something about the satellites. Whereas others only limped under their control.

There were those who'd prospered, though, from the satellites, I came to believe. The satellites, up in the heavens, were gods. Communicative gods, and those who'd contacted them, obeyed them, prayed to them, were rewarded accordingly.

The richest men in the world were certainly beholden to them. I saw a hierarchy formed. With Sean Hannity, Tucker Carlson, Rachel Maddow, and Vladimir Putin no doubt at the apex. Putin was definitely the head honcho of the satellites' ground control. You could see it in his beady little eyes and in his swaggering gait. Every second, Putin is doing the dark actors' bidding. That's why Putin is a trillionaire.

Risking their inevitable wrath, I had to expose Putin, the stars, the Sun. Expose their true intentions to trick, deceive, control humanity by making it greedier, stupider. By dumbing it down. Killing literacy. Killing attention spans. Social media, Twitter, TikTok, their master weapons, have been extraordinarily successful in this regard.

I had to stop the dark actors. Before it was too late. So I began planning my mission. But I knew that it could fail. Being as such, I had to let others know of the satellites and their ilk.

I began writing stories and poems about the satellites and articles discussing the truth about the freedom fighters and sending these writings out to multiple media outlets, magazines, but, like my music, the demos I'd sent out, all were rejected. Most outlets simply didn't respond, but the few who did sent form letter

rejections. Never once did I get a personal response from the masses of editors I contacted.

Because they were under the satellites' control! It had to be the reason... I was also seeing zombies again, walking dead people, from the corners of my eyes, as I had seen when I was a kid, and I had begun to think that most humans were zombies, eating animal meat instead of human flesh, and that the satellites and tech giants controlled their brains...

I'd been drinking vodka to dull my pain, and I was drinking increasingly large quantities. I didn't have friends anymore so I couldn't score weed or other drugs. So I drank. I'd also snort bath salts. Bath salts helped hide the floaters...

While drunk, I'd sit alone in my ground floor studio apartment, on the mattress on the floor. I began watching infomercials, on YouTube, at night, knowing they were sent by the satellites, but I was trying to decode them, see into their message, so I could defeat it.

It was around then that my insomnia worsened, because I was being kept awake due to my new next-door neighbors, a young Mexican couple and their crying, wailing and yelping fucking shitbag of a baby. The couple would scream and curse at each other, constantly, shrilly, in Spanish, and their baby would shriek at all hours. The walls in my building turned out to be a lot thinner than I thought.

When I wasn't writing, I was spending most of my free time studying freedom fighters, martyrs for our cause.

I saw through the satellites' obfuscation. I knew their true intentions and that the EMP waves, the psychic energy sent from the moon was in control of their simulated responses.

I knew my brothers were living on the moon. In a bastion of freedom. If not in body, most certainly in soul.

(It was at this time that I also began to think of ways to murder the neighbors' baby. Horrible, ghastly methods, but my favorite, aside from punting it like a football, was to shoot it from a large slingshot or catapult and watch it soar off into the horizon, its wailing fading out, like the merciful end of a terrible song, as the little shitbag flew into the distance...)

Flipping around the TV, one night, between infomercials, I found the movie "Taxi Driver" playing on cable. After watching it, I took a piss, in the sink, and let a trickle go into a cup and drank it, thinking it would give me power.

Sipping the piss, I stared at my reflection in my bathroom mirror and decided to shave my head into a mohawk, like the movie's protagonist, Travis Bickle, which I did.

Amazingly, at work, the next day, I didn't get reprimanded for my haircut. Right after I cut my hair into the mohawk, I thought maybe I'd be fired or chastised, the company demanding me to shave it off. But they didn't.

In fact, when I showed up to work the next day, wearing my suit and tie and having my mohawk spiked up high in the air with hair gel, my boss, the 60ish baldy, the lardass in the pin-striped suits and wingtips, always with a shiny platinum tie clip and floral patterned silk ties, my boss walked by my cubicle, smiled at me, chuckled, and flashed a double thumbs up, then vanished into his office.

Perhaps he was part of the resistance, I pondered...

It was about this time, after I started wearing my hair in a mohawk, that I started listening to a lot of Pantera's "Vulgar Display of Power" and was reading "Catcher in the Rye."

While slapping myself in the face one night, I thought about how Mark David Chapman should have shot Yoko instead, in the face, with piss. I tore off my clothes, ran to my notebook and wrote a haiku about it. Then I sent the poem to the New Yorker and Yoko's publicist just for shits and giggles.

Neither responded.

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It was a fugue. It was spectacular. But I was convinced the visions were real. That everything was limpid. The waves from the sky, leading to society's anomie, that it all was real.

But slowly, fortunately, for me, and countless others, who might have been slapped or kicked and shot in the face with piss or had seen me running the streets naked, my visions unraveled. And I don't know how. The ghosts dissipated. The fog cleared. The floaters vanished. I began to see the satellites as space junk. I began to see my mind as filled, painted with lies. I began to understand my hate for myself and realize that my antipathy towards others was a manifestation of my own demons.

I started to study game theory. Then I began to believe in nothing. Became a nihilist. And for a time, a solipsist. And for a time, an existentialist. Then my hate, my obsession with mass face and head slapping sprees, pissing on people, and baby punting, shooting babies from catapults, that was my own rage displaying itself. And I knew my emerging belief that murder was freedom was because I wanted to be part of something. I wanted to be known. Be part of a cause. Because I was lost, a lost soul, without meaning, a rebel searching for a cause.

I wanted to believe in conspiracy because it allowed me structure, a lattice, an order, and a reason. I came to realize that this is why conspiracy theory was so popular, because it bestowed reason, provided a scaffold.

9/11 being an inside job, devised by satellites or the CIA, was an easier answer because it had meaning. More meaning than a small crew of crazed assholes armed with boxcutters and divine lunatic ideology.

Sandy Hook had to be a stunt to repossess guns because no one as frail and weird as Adam Lanza could perpetrate such horror. As per one conspiracy video on YouTube, Adam Lanza didn't even have a Twitter, Facebook, or LinkedIn profile. So he couldn't have really existed!

Kennedy couldn't have been shot by Oswald, certainly not alone. Oswald? The guy was a putz!

My ideas of satellites, dark actors, floaters and ghosts, were visions, yes, but were figments of my imagination, as are most all conspiracy theories.

I was seeing that there was no absolute truth. There was no order or predetermination.

There was nothing other than randomness and what I created.

My failures weren't failures. They were attempts, and I was happy that I'd made the attempts, rather than been a coward, sitting on the sidelines, snarking on others all day online, snarking on those who did try, feebly trying to scare away those who create!

I could have been a film, music, or literary critic, dammit! Written book reviews, bashing authors on Goodreads! Fucking Goodreads! Thank heavens I didn't devolve into such depravity!

I had nothing to feel bad about. I lived in a first world country. I was a weirdo with a mohawk, living like a hermit, but at least I wasn't living on the street. I had a job! I had a place to live! I wasn't a fucking bum!

I'd pass by homeless, dirty, stinking of piss, sprawled out on sidewalks or begging for change, and I'd wonder why this was. Why this man was smeared in shit and why Jeff Bezos was in a penthouse. How did their paths diverge? If there was a God or satellite control or heavens or meaning, why was there this disparity, this suffering, this waste? Why was this creature allowed to live in torment?

Why did war, rape, natural disaster happen? It made no sense that God or gods or satellites willed such events. Why then would anyone believe in them? Wouldn't we think of them as malevolent and rise to destroy them, eventually? Could they contain us with Putin and microwave rays and lizard people and vampires, digital ghosts forever?

No. There was nothing but randomness. No such thing as fate. I would write my own script. I would write my own book!

I shaved off my mohawk and snapped out of my visions, began to exercise far more intensively, and set out to embrace the randomness, chaos. I'd be water. I'd be happy that part of me was made up of matter from the Big Bang. That the universe, time, was infinite. That me being a cosmic speck, a blip, was, actually, in its own way, a beautiful, serene thing...

And, really, at the end of the day, I was spending too much time alone, online too much, and needed to make new friends, and get out more, and find a new girlfriend. I aver that possibly countless social media posts and countless tragedies could have been stopped if only some of those guys had a friend or a two and certainly if they had a girlfriend...

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It's crazy, how incredibly cosmic and random everything really is. How one day, one chance encounter, can change everything. And I soon had another encounter that would forever alter my life's trajectory.

At the gym, as I walked by the chest press, a dude, around my age and also squat, with close-cropped hair, had asked me, while I was passing by, if I could spot him on the chest press, and we got to talking; I found that he was a rare local, a fellow Florida boy, actually from the Sarasota area, not a transplant, snowbird, or tourist.

When I asked what line of business he was in, he hesitated for a second, furtively looked away. Then he swung his gaze back to me and, with a deadpan look, told me straightforwardly that he was in the funeral services industry. Was the manager of a funeral home.

"A reliable business, recession proof," I quipped, and we shared a laugh, which obliterated the tension. I was thinking he probably received strong responses when people heard of his job, and he was visibly relieved that I didn't have qualms.

When I told him I was a loan officer, he perked up. He'd been thinking of branching out, leveraging, and buying into the franchise of funeral homes that he worked for, he told me. I told him I could possibly set him up. And thus, a business partnership was born.

The franchise he worked for was profitable, highly so. And I decided to take things a step further and join him, use some cash I'd saved to buy in as well, and was able to secure financing, not from my company, but another (mine had passed on the idea, so we went to another bank and were successful in our proposal).

Our leveraged stake in the franchise paid off handsomely for both of us. I was able to quit my job as a loan officer and to work full-time, handling various matters at the funeral homes.

Many might find this line of work icky, morbid. But I don't. I see death as a part of life. Corpses, caskets, and funerals don't dismay or scare me. If anything, working

with death reminds me how limited our time is, how each one of us, anyone reading this, will be in that box one day. Would our time have the same meaning if it were infinite? I don't think so... Time is truly the only commodity we can't replace. Being a coworker of death has clarified this...

Because of my outlook, or for whatever reason, I took to work at the funeral homes easily, naturally. Including speaking with, receiving customers, grief-stricken families, loved ones.

I think that my experience with death, losing my father at a young age, losing my wife, my girlfriend, two babies, that that trauma had given me perspective and ability to feel empathy for those dealing with loss. Rather than cowering or being pedantic, offering advice to those in grief, I listen to them, take on a role of grief counselor, and lend them an empathetic ear during their time of sorrow. I know their pain. I live their pain. I share their pain. And I do what I can to help them along in their grieving process.

Of course, word spreads, with how we take care of people, and, with Florida's large elderly population, many seek our services.

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I finally found a business I enjoy. I am successful, spiritually and financially.

I still suffer from CTE. My memory has deteriorated. But I counter this by taking assiduous notes, always jotting things down on memo pads or on my phone. I keep my brain active as well by studying Spanish, which also allows me to help a larger demographic of customers.

I've cut way back on the drinking. I no longer use illegal drugs. I take anti-depressants, and those, along with exercise keeps me moving forward. Keeps the demons away and muzzled. The demons are there, sure, but the pharmaceuticals and intense exercise I do keeps them at bay.

I also met a lovely divorcee, a raven-haired Latina, a single mom, whose father I helped lay to rest. Her companionship, her lovely young daughter's smile, gives me hope, gives me reason.

Sure, part of me remains a nihilist. But I believe that you write your destiny. I've written mine. From a juvenile delinquent to failed musician. From failed businessman to listless soul tormented by demons. To, finally, a loving partner and stepfather and successful businessman in an industry, job I not only profit from financially, but profit from psychically as well.

I've survived. I've overcome. I've written my story.

